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CUPID AND COMMONSENSE

A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

WITH A PREFACE ON
THE CRISIS IN THE THEATRE

59
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By

ARNOLD BENNETT

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LONDON
FRANK PALMER
14 RED LION COURT, E.C.
1912

First Published, May, 1909.
Second Edition, Sept., 1910.
Third Edition, Jan., 1912.
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MERCAT PRESS EDINBURGH

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To

WILLIAM LEE-MATHEWS

FRIEND

PREFACE

THE CRISIS IN THE THEATRE

At the outset I must ask permission to give a few personal details in order to indicate clearly the standpoint from which I write. Before launching myself in the profession of letters, I was engaged for some ten years in various business offices, during which time I received a fairly complete training in business methods; I have conducted a business. For five years I was dramatic critic for several London papers in turn, and in this capacity I attended nearly every first night from 1895 to 1900. I count several West End theatrical managers and leading actors among my friends, and I have talked at great length with them under circumstances in which they would not be likely to talk as though to an interviewer. I have written, or collaborated in, about a dozen plays, five of which I have sold to West End managers and received money for, and two of which were commissioned. None of these plays has ever been performed; my sole representations in a London theatre have owed nothing to the reckless daring of any manager. In 1900 I

quitted London, and for nearly eight years (chiefly spent in Paris, where I had full opportunities of studying the French stage) I scarcely set foot in a London theatre. I then passed three months in London, practically as a Chinaman, visiting the theatres, confabulating with managers, agents, actors and actresses, attending rehearsals, and generally listening to jeremiads.

I approach the London theatrical crisis, therefore, as a member of the public, a man of business, a critic, a novelist, a dramatist, a *habitué* of managerial sanctums, a familiar of the Parisian stage, and a perfect stranger.

I

The first thing that I noticed on returning to London in my quality of Chinaman was the extraordinary frequency of theatres. Yet a few years and Shaftesbury Avenue will be lined with theatres from end to end! I saw that the builders had not been able even to erect the Waldorf Hotel without propping it up at either side with a theatre. A glance at the leader page of the *Telegraph* showed unmistakably how theatres had multiplied since I was a first-nighter. I soon learnt, too, on all sides, that, despite the prevalence of theatres, rents had mightily risen. A good average theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue without a shred of tradition behind it, lets at ten thousand a year. Even the Savoy, which cannot be accused of thrusting itself forward, finds

tenant at seven thousand. Henry Irving paid five thousand for the Lyceum less than twenty years ago.

There are now nearly thirty theatres justly entitled to call themselves first-class West End houses (as against eighteen in Paris). Of these, on the day on which I write this, five are giving musical comedy, thirteen are giving plays which cannot conceivably interest any person of cultivated taste, the Apollo is sheltering those relentless critics of the stage, The Follies ; two are giving works of art, and eight are closed. The rent of the eight closed houses is most probably not less than a thousand pounds a week.

These eight theatres are presumably eating their heads off to the tune of a hundred and fifty pounds a night because the managers of them have been unable to obtain plays which, in their opinion, would draw sufficient money into the box-office to cover all expenses save the rent. For if a manager finds himself in the necessity of losing, say, two hundred a week, he would surely prefer to lose it with his theatre open than with his theatre closed. A closed theatre is losing more than money—it is losing prestige, both for itself and for its manager ; and prestige is golden. Moreover, some lessees are bound by their leases to pay a nightly fine for the luxury of closing their theatres during the season. Such is the ingenuity of proprietors ! And, indeed, the dearth of plays was confirmed by everybody with whom I came in contact. One day I was given particulars of

five managements who had nothing at all "to follow." Another manager said to me: "This play that I'm going to produce won't run, I'm almost certain, and I've nothing else to put up." "Then what shall you do?" I asked. "I don't know," he replied; "I'm open for anything." Discretion forbade my inquiring why he should produce a play without faith. Besides, I knew. Said an agent, speaking of the managers: "They can't get plays, simply can't get 'em—the right sort, that is—and what's more, they can't get people to come to the box-office. People won't come." The second phenomenon seemed to me to be a direct consequence of the first; but in the mind of the agent they were apparently quite detached.

Next after this strange dearth of plays—"the right sort, that is"—what struck me most was the bitterness of lessees against landlords. "It's the ground-landlord that is crushing us to death," said a manager gloomily. "I don't happen to have noticed that the price of stalls has risen. No, everything's dearer—except seats. There's no money in management nowadays!" I named a success. "Barely paying exes.," he said. I named another. "Losing between two and three hundred a week," he said. And so it ran on. Even some of the musical comedies (musical comedies, by the way, together with music-halls and circuses, were excluded from my inquiries) had deteriorated from gold-mines into copper-mines. Gloom, the gloom of Sam Johnson, was

the "note" of managerial sanctums. Gloom was written on the foreheads of the inhabitants of box-offices. Critics were discussing gloom, and artistes were borrowing money from each other to pay for luncheons. The state of affairs was notorious, and notorious it still is.

However, capitalists were busily planning more new theatres, costlier and more resplendent than any yet constructed!

II

The explanation of all this singular condition of the London stage must be sought in one or more of its four constituent factors—the manager, the actor, the public, the author. Let me first examine the manager.

Now it is to be noted that, when the manager is not an actor-manager, he has, nevertheless, nearly always been an actor. That is to say, he has the histrionic temperament, which is no ordinary temperament. Without being unkind to the histrionic temperament one can assert that a man whose instincts have driven him on to the stage, while he may be a true artist, is attracted by glitter, by the factitious, by the excitement of risks, and by the prospect of applause. He must necessarily love to pose in public. The essential fibre of his character must, after he has attained any success at all, have been weakened, if not destroyed, by that most disastrous drug, open applause. He must be egotistic; he must have

acquired, consciously or unconsciously, the habit of regarding things theatrically, and of talking about them theatrically.

The average managerial office is a proof of this. Every business person switched suddenly into the theatrical world discovers that it *is* a theatrical world, and that the notions held by even the least unbusinesslike manager as to what constitutes business fall far short of the business person's notion. The theatrical manager usually conducts his affairs—as the sporting Frenchman prosecutes sport—too self-consciously, with too much flourish and fuss, and too little precision. One is in a universe where the telegram supersedes the letter, where the telephone bell is always ringing, where always something or other must be done instantly, and where everyone is apparently at strain. The manager loves to surround himself with mystery; he loves to erect walls between himself and the rest of the world. Call and ask to see a manager, and the very face of the preliminary minion will cry out to you: "Good heavens, man, are you in your senses? If so, be kind enough to furnish documentary evidence of an appointment." When at last you scale the walls, you find the Llama obviously endeavouring to realise in life the ideal of business which he has learnt to admire on the stage. But the pose soon breaks down under the attacks of his good nature, and though he is the busiest man in London he may let fall that he spent the whole of the previous day in scouring London for

an Empire arm-chair exactly suitable for the luxurious second act of his next piece. All managers that I have ever met are seriously convinced that they are the busiest men in London, and that no one outside the profession can conceive the amount of work which they accomplish. This is invariably their excuse for the omission of formalities considered indispensable in other branches of business.

One discovers, further, that managers suffer from the inevitable consequences of their training and environment. For them "the great Beast" is always on the other side of the curtain, waiting to put its thumbs up or its thumbs down. The verdict is immediate, raising them to heights of joy or plunging them in woe. Their patron is too close to them; and when he does not smile on their efforts they call him capricious. Believing him to be capricious, they look upon the enterprise of trying to please him as a gambling enterprise. Like all gamblers they alternate between erratic impulsiveness and an exaggerated caution; like all gamblers they stipulate for a dead certainty, and when they get tired of waiting for it to come along they clutch at random, and accept what they happen to seize. Like all gamblers they are prodigal of money when they have a lot. They think in thousands, or they do not think at all.

Of course, their perspective is distorted. The histrionic temperament is at work all around them, as well as in their own minds, and it is inevitable that their perspective should be distorted. The

superficial matters—what is seen at the first glance, what strikes the eye—always make the strongest appeal to their attention. Thus the organisation of their energies is often fantastically bizarre. Every manager will admit that the most important part of theatrical management is the choice of plays. Many managers will show you with pride a statistical book giving a list of all the plays submitted to them, with title, name of author, number of acts, date received, date returned, and "remarks." It is a beautiful sight: a clerk keeps it. Most managers will tell you that in order to be sure of not missing a good thing they read all plays themselves. They will insist on the extremity of their eagerness for a good thing. But where a particular play is in question you will hear phrases such as "As soon as I can," "When I have a moment," "You must wait a few weeks, I'm so fearfully busy," "The first free evening I can arrange." And so on. In a word, they leave the most important part of their business till they can snatch an odd moment for it. At best, it is customarily done at night, after the fatigues of the day. If one of their troupe were to say, "As soon as I have half an hour to spare I'll have a look at my new part," what would be the response? In nine theatres out of ten the entire rigmarole of reading and selecting plays is merely grotesque—an outrageous defiance of commonsense.

But even if the average manager arranged his days and his energies with a proper regard for the

fact that his success or failure depends on the wisdom of his choice in plays he would still lack, chiefly from no fault of his own, the informed and disciplined taste which is necessary to choose well. I do not mean that he would lack the ability to choose well from a purely artistic point of view—no one would expect him to be in possession of a gift so unnecessary to his position; I mean that he would lack the ability to choose well even according to the standards of his own public. The existence of the manager is bounded by the walls of his theatre. How often does he venture out in order to witness the productions of other theatres? Scarcely ever. Of certain prominent managers it may be said that they never visit another theatre. Some take an astonishing pride in the habit of seclusion. Instead of tumbling over each other in anxiety to be abreast of the times, it is only with the greatest difficulty that they can be persuaded into the open. One must remember that they believe themselves to be the busiest men in London. They may often be brought to consider what is pertinaciously offered to them; they are usually ready to listen with interest to *viva voce* reports of what is going on in the world; but of first-hand knowledge they have practically none. Their pre-occupation with themselves, their theatre, their troupe, and the deep conviction of their own miraculous industry, prevent them from watching even intermittently the developments of theatrical art and theatrical taste. Far too busy to scan the horizon for signs,

intensely conservative by reason of their restricted and self-centred existence, they are incapable of crediting that a change is coming about. Not until it has actually come about, and proved its reality in half a dozen box-offices, do they begin to prepare for it. The most pathetic and tragic of their illusions is that they have their finger on the pulse of the public. Tell them that they are scarcely the persons best fitted to judge the suitability of a play, and they will merely regard you as wrong in the head, or as a humourist whose good taste is not infallible. They may hopefully produce a play that does not survive twenty nights; but their faith in their good judgment will survive. It will survive a dozen such experiences.

Another thing which militates against the fruition of their desires is their quite remarkable ignorance of life and letters. I should recoil from a statement so crude had I not heard them again and again bravely and cheerfully assert that ignorance was one of the necessary penalties of their calling. They are too busy not to be ignorant. As a rule, they read nothing but press notices. As for opening a book, they cannot, in ordinary circumstances, attempt such a thing. They frankly stand aside from the current of life. You must not expect impossibilities from them. I have encountered examples of managerial ignorance which reached the heroic, and if I related them my slowly-built reputation for exactitude would crumble in an instant. But I may furnish minor instances. I was chatting once with a manager

who had expressed admiration of a play by Mr Eden Phillpotts. I inquired, in the way of small talk, whether he had read Mr Phillpotts's last novel. "Does he write novels, too?" asked the manager; and upon my positive assurance that Mr Phillpotts did write novels, the manager said that he really must read them, as he was sure they must be delightful. Another manager, when the name Mr H. G. Wells appeared in a conversation, stopped a moment, in silent cerebral activity, and then said: "You mean the Jules Verne man?" He seemed relieved to find that he had not been mistaken.

In these observation upon the "character" of the theatrical manager I, of course, do not include all managers. There are exceptions, but the exceptions are excessively rare, and not exactly in the places where one would look for them. Nor would I have it thought I am pouring blame on them. A little irony in one's attitude towards certain symptoms of the managerial mentality is, I hope, to be excused; but I admit that I have not been able to see how, given the present organisation of theatrical business, a manager could be different from what he is. He is the result of his environment acting on his temperament. The path of his reform—some managers dream of reform—is strewn with very grave difficulties of an entirely exceptional nature.

III

With regard to the art of acting in London, it suffers under manifest disadvantages—from the evil of long runs, and also, at present, from the evil of short runs; from the evil of a far too honeyed Press; from the evil of the actor-manager who, with a curious blindness to his own interest, does his best to kill all genuine acting in his immediate vicinity; and, most important, from the fatal tendency of the British public to demand from an artist that he shall repeat himself monotonously *ad infinitum*. This last is the bane of all the arts in England. Let a man once act, for instance, a policeman, or paint a policeman, or sing a policeman, or carve a policeman, to the tickling of the public taste, and he stands condemned to act, paint, sing, or carve policemen, and nothing but policemen, to his dying day. In the theatre, as in the other arts, the result is a hard stereotyping of talent, and, indirectly, the excessive exploitation of the actor's physical characteristics. Some of the consequences are grotesquely absurd. As when a manager in his wisdom announces: "Such and such a part in such and such a piece is, I admit, small, but it is a character part, and the only possible man to play it is So-and-So. Now So-and-So is in America, and after he comes back he is booked for at least six months at the Majestic; therefore I cannot put on the piece until So-and-So has finished at the Majestic."

Nevertheless, it is probable that, of the theatri-

l machine, no portion is less out of gear than the tor. The competition among actors is so keen at a considerable quantity of genuine effective ill and power must necessarily emerge. I am ware that at all periods of the theatre's history extraordinary keenness of competition among ors has been alleged. But at the present epoch would seem that competition really is more ere than it used to be. The stage has, apparently, been invaded by a class of men and women ferent from the stock-class, better educated, of perior manners and bearing, and with rather s than the customary indifferences to the outside rld. The results are before the public, and I nk that even the public will not deny them. t before, in living memory, has there been such quantity of intelligent, vigorous material struging for acceptance on the stage. I do not refer actor-managers and a few shooting stars of high gnitude, who have long since been weighed in balance. I refer to the younger generation, ich is being cultivated by non-acting managers, l by the various private societies for the enragement of the drama. This younger generon is astonishingly anxious to get something ne, astonishingly enthusiastic in its ill-paid our, and, when it recovers from the first shock, onishingly ready to accept new ideals in the ys which it is called on to interpret. It is able of being taught anything—even not to put face within two inches of the lady with whom s flirting.

On the whole, English acting will favourably compare with French. The shining celebrities o London are decidedly inferior to the shining cele brities of Paris ; we have no Lucien Guitry, nc Réjane, no Marthe Brandès. But I should bc inclined to support an assertion that in the mas we beat the French. English farcical acting i incomparably superior to French, and in pur comedy we hold our own. In tragedy it remain to us to learn. My general impression is tha Englishmen act better than Frenchmen, anc Frenchwomen than Englishwomen. Assuredly great deal of minor work on Parisian stages o the second class would not be tolerated i London, so unpolished is it, so unintentionall ridiculous.

In the matter of interpretation, London suffer mainly from bad stage-management. The strange is very unpleasantly struck by the mouthing, th posturing, the pausing, the over-elaborate busi ness, the general unnaturalness of movement, anc the Chatham and Dover speed which are th marks of a thoroughly bad tradition in stag management. His desire is to cry out : "Ge on ! Get on with the piece !" When Antoin produced *King Lear* he played the whole of it without a single cut or rearrangement of scene sequence, in two hours and a quarter. No Englis stage-manager would undertake to do it in les than double the time. English stage-managemen ought to be entirely forgotten, and then recom menced by a new generation of stage-manager

who have realised that they, as well as the author, must look occasionally at life itself, and make, at anyrate, some attempt at realism. In one or two theatres an effort has already been begun, but the praise which that effort has received is undue. I have seen no stage-management whatever in London which approaches the stage-management of the Odéon or the Renaissance. With all our solid scenery and real waterfalls we remain, in this department, infants.

IV

At first sight perhaps the most puzzling phenomenon of the English stage is the fact that a chronic state of bad business coincides with what is termed, and what, indeed, looks like, a tremendous revival of interest in the drama. It appears strange that while theatres are everywhere multiplying after the manner of Australian rabbits, West-End managers should be selling their automobiles and taking to taximeter cabs.

But the question arises: Does the multiplication of theatres imply a revival of interest in the drama? I do not think that it does. Theatres are not the only apparatus of luxury that have multiplied. Hotels have multiplied; restaurants have multiplied; concerts bave multiplied; and art galleries, music-halls, illustrated volumes on painting, cheap books of all kinds, and every sort of periodical. Owing to the extraordinary improvements in mechanical production, the nation

is richer, and luxury and leisure have increased Owing to better education, and especially owing to the Education Act of 1871, the artistic and intellectual curiosity of the race has been awakened pricked, sharpened. The theatre, in common with other arts and pleasures, has felt the force of this vast general impulse. But the impulse is from below, not from above. And it is an impulse due directly, not to the fundamental creative spirit of the nation, but to statesmanship and to the application of scientific discovery. The growing taste for the theatre is, at present, no more a symptom of artistic life than the growing taste for restaurants is a symptom of artistic life.

Instead of describing the spectacle which may be seen any Saturday afternoon or evening outside a London or suburban theatre as a proof of a *revival* of interest in the drama, we should describe it as a proof of a *new-born* interest in the drama. Theatres are being built now, not in response to the demand of trained intelligences that have turned for pleasure from some other art to the art of the drama, but in response to the demand of untrained, child-like intelligences just arousing themselves to the significance of things. This distinction is important, for it enables one to understand why, in a field of enterprise greatly widened, there should be so much dissatisfaction at the centre. The immense mass of infantile interest needs guiding; it prefers to be guided; it is ready to accept almost anything that is sufficiently mediocre. The trouble is that the com-

paratively small quantity of trained intelligence which should set the fashion is not in a position to guide it, and cannot call into existence a definite school of good work the popularisation of which would satisfy the desires of the mass. The mass could not, and never at any period of history did, appreciate fine art, but it could and would appreciate and support passable deteriorations of fine art. The craftsmen capable of working for the populace, however, require regular, accepted models which they can suitably debase. They find none, for the old standards are worn out; and hence the capricious confusion which characterises the centre is communicated to the entire field.

In support of the argument that the present alleged revival of interest which translates itself into brick and stone in the West End has no connection with the cultivated taste of the race, we have only to glance at the Press. The organs which give special attention to the theatre, and by their adjectival exertions promote the sale of photographs and postcards and the collecting of "souvenirs," are utterly reactionary in tone. Their criticisms are ill and ignorantly written, and cannot fail to sadden the instructed. Their ideals are the ideals of the Stock Exchange, the supper-room, and the fancy-dress ball; whereas serious papers devote not an inch more space to the drama than they did twenty years ago, and their notices become more and more ironical.

Further, where a field of enterprise enlarges to

the dimensions of popularity, there the speculator is certain to rush in. Theatrical speculation, foolishly directed from the City, has of late years done a great deal to demoralise the business side of the theatre. The regular managers, not being the men of business they imagine themselves to be, have absurdly competed with speculation in the hope of killing it, instead of allowing it to die an inconspicuous death. And in the competition between managers and freakish speculation the ground-landlord, as usual, has come by a little more than his own. Ground-landlords are notoriously first-class men of business, and they have beyond question, in the instance of theatres, lived right up to their reputation. Impossible to blame them! At the same time, impossible not to sympathise with the industrious managers in their plaint: "It's the ground-landlord that is crushing us to death!"

V

"According to my idea the author is everything, simply everything," said a manager to me. It is true that he was speaking to an author, and that he is exceedingly courteous. But I believe he meant what he said. I believe he had grasped the truth that it is just as sensible to cut a stick to fit a hole as it is to get a theatre and some actors and a policy, and then search for an author to fit them. And, indeed, the author is, in a far more profound sense than the manager dreamed,

"everything." The author is at the bottom of the theatrical situation.

Why does not the intelligent imaginative writer turn his attention to the theatre?

This question has often been posed. The literary expert, the man versed in all the complicated organisation of literature, will answer it by asking another question:

Why should he?

The conditions are such as will repel, instead of attracting, an artist. An author who has something to say writes a novel and posts it to a publisher, and if it is worth publishing the chances are that it will be published. He may be—he often is—swindled by the publisher, but the thing does get itself before the public with the minimum of nervous annoyance to the author. The novelist is not forced to butt with his sensitive head against the triple brass of a charming fellow who never opens a book. He is not forced to wait in anterooms, to rush round in cabs, to haunt telegraph-offices, and generally to catch the busiest person in London on the hop. He has no explaining to do, no arguing. He is not under the necessity of altering his work in order that the merchant, having seen it altered, may consider again whether after all he must refuse it. He is not continually reminded that the public will not stand this, that, and the other. He is not formidably told that it will cost at least two thousand pounds to produce his novel. His artistic self-respect is not damaged by contact with a world which is the

open scorn of cultivated minds. After his work is accepted, he has not to wait indefinitely for its publication. Its publication does not depend on the success or failure of other works. There is for the novelist no such process of torture as that called "rehearsals," during which his work drops like a pig into the terrible machine of the theatre to emerge as heaven knows what pork, according to the temperaments of stars and satellites. Nothing separates him from his public except the printer and the binder.

The financial rewards of the theatre are, of course, sometimes immense. But the expert will tell you that, though they may be immense "sometimes," they are frequently less than immense, and at best are uncertain. A novelist of first-class popularity probably makes quite as much as a dramatist of first-class popularity, and the medium men in fiction assuredly make more, year in year out, than the medium men in drama, with far less anxiety and risk. A dramatist may clear a couple of thousand pounds out of a play, and then not make another thousand in four years, whereas a novelist who has made a thousand or two with a novel may be fairly sure of a regular commensurate income. Further, the demand for fiction is infinitely greater and more various than the demand for plays.

Thus will the expert explain the divorce between literature and the theatre. And the statements which he brings forward are incontrovertible. The only point to note is that, instead of describ-

ing the causes of the divorce between literature and the theatre, he has been describing some of the effects of that divorce. If he had been correctly describing the causes, the same condition of affairs would obtain in France, Germany, and Italy as in England; for the machinery of the theatre is exactly as clumsy there as it is here. Whereas it is notorious that in those countries no cleavage exists between literature and the theatre, and that, on the contrary, especially in Germany, the theatre is the chief vehicle of ideas.

The truth lies deeper; it lies in the dim subterranean fact that since Goldsmith and Sheridan, the literary genius of the English race has turned away from the theatre. The reason of its deviation cannot be precisely determined; it can perhaps scarcely be guessed at. But turn away it did. With Richardson we invented the realistic novel; and with Scott, quite soon afterwards, we invented the romantic novel. Our impulse towards fiction must have been of terrific intensity. And since at the same time our lyric and elegiac poetry burst into the most splendid blossom, and has never ceased to bloom, it is not surprising that we had no first-class energy left for the theatre. One race cannot do everything, cannot possess everything, cannot enjoy everything. And it is the dramatic gift of which, for over a hundred years, our literary evolution has deprived us.

Authors are the expression of a nation's force, the symptoms of its developing change. If the

supply of plays fails, it is a proof that the racial mind has discovered employment in another art than that of the theatre. Effect reacts on cause and increases it. The intelligent public, finding a deterioration in the theatre, goes less and less to the theatre, while the unintelligent public, finding an agreeable mediocrity in the theatre, goes more and more. So the descent continues, so it has continued, until the divorce is almost complete, as in England. So it occurs that English managers, instead of being familiar with ideas, as in Germany and France, are simply scared to death by the mere rumour of an idea. So it occurs that in summing up the artistic achievement of nineteenth century England a critic would not dream of mentioning its theatre. So it occurs that the best creative artists among us do not actively realise that the theatre is a possible vehicle for them.

There is no other explanation. The unfathomable race-spirit has chosen other avenues than the theatre—simply that. As a machine for expression the theatre is deplorably unwieldly ; but not more so in England than elsewhere. And an artist is not frightened by machinery ; mechanical difficulties challenge him to effort. As for non-mechanical difficulties, the artist is the cause of them, and not the effect.

VI

Having contemplated the various factors, we may now approach the heart of the mystery.

What is the origin of disturbance in the theatre? It was calm and contented enough ten years ago. Cultivated people ignored it as much as they could, and it ignored cultivated people entirely. *The Profligate* was greeted as a daring masterpiece, and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* as another daring masterpiece, by *habitués* of the theatre. Everybody was happy. Why should the bland happiness of the theatre have been upset? The mass of the people had discovered the theatre, along with musical dinners, and money was flowing into the meritorious pockets of the busiest men in London. Who is the blundering intruder that would not leave well alone?

The answer can only be that the blundering intruder is the general creative spirit which, after having turned its back on the stage for a hundred years or so, has veered again towards it. No other answer will fit into the details of the situation. The opening manifestation of the slow-moving spirit occurred, I don't know how many years since, in a little theatre off the Strand, destroyed now, and it assumed the form of a play entitled *Widowers' Houses*. It is remarkable that a man cannot write an essay even on the modern stage without bringing in the name of Mr Bernard Shaw. But he cannot. It so happens that Mr Shaw is the symbol of the whole shindy. He is a writer of genius, and before him, during the entire course of the nineteenth century, no British writer of genius ever devoted his creative power principally to the stage. Between Sheridan and

Shaw there is nothing—save sublime accidents such as *The Cenci* (which, of course, no censor would dream of licensing: this by the way)! The spectacle of a genius writing for the stage was a severe shock to cultivated people. A few of those restless minds which are continually vexing the vast lethargy of a universe that hates change as a schoolboy hates soap, began to make an immense fuss, and the Stage Society was formed. Then other societies. Actors responded to the challenge. These astonishing events (quite separate, be it noted, from the "revival of interest" known to Shaftesbury Avenue) aroused condescension, and afterwards irritation, in the theatrical world and in its Press. Ibsen was a foreigner, and therefore to be excused, because he knew no better. But deliberately to encourage new ideas on the stage was outrageous. However, the enterprise must fail! *You Never Can Tell* was condescendingly put into rehearsal at a West-End theatre of the highest class, but the rehearsals proved that it fell short of the lofty standards set by Mr Henry Arthur Jones and Mr Sidney Grundy, and the affair ceased before production! Still, that pertinacious spirit, personified for the moment by Mr Shaw, kept labouring on. It would not be quiet. And at length it began to breed dissatisfaction—a dissatisfaction which spread and spread, until it reached box-offices. A most amazing spirit!

Many managers had by this time heard of Mr Shaw. But they thought he was merely Mr

Shaw, not guessing that he was also something far larger and more formidable, and they did not trouble about him. They never connected the lack of regular vitality in box-offices with Mr Shaw and the something behind him. They never surmised—and I doubt if they even now surmise —that he is the chief outward sign of the secret force which is gradually worrying them to death ; that he stands for a racial impulse toward fresh artistic expression by means of the drama, and that this impulse, having produced authors and actors, is little by little melting and remoulding taste, as a strong creative impulse always does.

They will be the last to perceive the truth ; even the theatrical press will perceive it before they perceive it.

Living as they do right out of the real world, they know nothing of the " feel " of things. They notice that the public is getting more capricious and unreliable, and that the sort of play which they know by endless experience ought to please the public is getting rarer, and when obtained is no longer its good old self. They say : " Dear me ! " They arrange for an overdraft, until this temporary malady of the public and of dramatists shall have passed. They are incapable of comprehending that all has begun to move except themselves. And who shall go up to them and tell them frankly that they are behind the times in their luxurious mediæval sanctums full of typewriters, telephones, and dictophones ?

They complain of a dearth of plays. And

assuredly there is a dearth of plays of the kind for which they are seeking. They are seeking for plays which would have pleased the public of twenty years ago, and which will please the public of to-day. Such plays do not abound. The men with skill enough to write them are few and ageing, and their ranks will not be filled up, because the creative spirit is in opposition to them. Only the duffers will join the old ranks. There is no dearth of plays which might commend themselves to a sufficient body of cultivated and semi-cultivated people. The germ of a new school visibly exists, and not until they courageously accept that new school, with all the special risks inevitable at a period of birth, will the managers be in a fair way of sleeping quietly at nights. But they are destined to go through many sleepless nights yet, so intense is their reactionary blindness—a blindness which simply cannot see what is staring it in the face. I remember, a few days after the production of *The House* at the Court Theatre, talking to a manager who did not know where to look for a play. Speaking of *The House*, which had been rather lukewarmly received by the Press, he surprised me by saying: "It was offered to me, but I refused it." "Why?" I asked. "Oh! I thought it would be awkward to put on," he said vaguely. But in spite of managers and Press, and of its peculiar length, *The House* got into the evening bill. It is notorious that one of the most brilliant of recent successes by a young author was put up as a stop-gap by a despairing

manager who could not lay his hand on anything else. But a hundred such phenomena will not pierce the absorbed egotism of managers. Only time and the attitude of bank directors will do that. Against the bland nescience of managers and against the Press the newly returning spirit will have a struggle. Its difficulties with even the more enlightened Press may be judged from the fact that Mr A. B. Walkley, a critic of quite exceptional gifts, who has grown morose while waiting for a messiah, much prefers *His House in Order* to *The Voysey Inheritance*! But the newly returning spirit is certain to win; the newly returning spirit always does. When the curtain fell on the last performance of *Arms and the Man* at the Savoy, a large portion of the Press went through the ceremony of burying the newly returning spirit. How it must have laughed!

March 1908.

CHARACTERS

The Play was produced by the Stage Society, under the direction of Mr Frank Vernon, on the 26th January 1908, at the Shaftesbury Theatre, with the following cast :—

Eli Boothroyd . . .	J. Fisher White
Alice } his daughters . .	Miss Lucy Wilson
Emily } . .	Miss Sybil Noble
Ralph Emery . . .	H. Nye Chart
Willie Beach . . .	Walter Pearce
Mrs Copestick (Ralph's aunt) .	Miss Mary Brough
Miranda Finney . . .	Miss Sydney Fairbrother
Edna Beach	Miss Hazel Thompson
Bessie (a servant) . . .	Miss G. Macdonald-Martin

ACT I

The Boothroyds' Parlour

ACT II

The Same

ACT III

Scene 1—The Same

Scene 2—Room at the Priory

ACT IV

Room at the Priory

Time and Place

Bursley, a small industrial town, one of the Five Towns

1901–1907

CUPID AND COMMONSENSE

ACT I

The Boothroyds' parlour. A room in a small house inhabited by a family of the lower middle-class, whose total expenditure does not exceed three pounds a week. The room is exceedingly plain and simple, also exceedingly neat and clean.

Alice is seated in centre, mending. Emily is doing her home-lessons at the table. On the table is a vase with a flower in it.

Time: Evening. The room is lighted by one gas-jet. A small fire is burning.

Emily.

I say, Alice.

Alice.

Well, what is it? Why don't you get on with your lessons?

Emily.

You *are* in love with him, aren't you?

Alice.

In love with him? What on earth are you talking about?

Emily (*sharply*).

Don't be silly! You know what I mean perfectly well.

Alice.

Do I indeed! (*Pause.*)

Emily.

Everyone *says* you're in love with him, anyway. Sarah Malkin stuck me out this morning after school that you were engaged to him: but of course I settled *her*, and pretty soon, too!

Alice.

I really do think you ought to know better than to go chattering to everybody about such things. I'm surprised at you!

Emily.

How can I help it? Besides, I don't go "chattering to everybody" (*imitating Alice's tone*). But when everybody is talking . . . . Why, it's all over the town!

Alice.

Well, I never heard the like! Never! Upon my word!

Emily.

Miss Dobson and the other mistresses are simply bursting with it.

Alice.

But there's been nothing whatever to——

Emily.

You can't deny he's the only man that ever calls *here.*

Alice.

How absurd! That's on business. He always sees father.

Emily.

Why is he changing from morning to afternoon superintendent at the Sunday School?

Alice.

In the first place, he hasn't changed yet.

Emily.

No, but he means to.

Alice.

The afternoon is more important. And seeing that old Mr Beach has resigned altogether, who else should take his place?

Emily.

That's all very well, but if you want to know, people are saying that he is only changing to the afternoon because you teach in the afternoon. So there!

Alice.

What ridiculous nonsense! I was going to say "wicked," but it's too silly to be wicked.

Emily.

Then you walked up with him to the park last Sunday afternoon to hear the band play.

Alice.

And weren't you with us ?

Emily.

Yes, but I don't count.

Alice.

Why not ?

Emily.

I'm not old enough. By the way, has father given you the two shillings for the Sunday School treat tickets ?

Alice.

Not yet.

Emily.

Have you asked him ?

Alice.

Yes.

Emily.

How often ?

Alice (*reluctantly*).

Twice.

Emily (*after a pause*).

You can't say he walked up to the park with us on father's business—there's no getting over that. That's where Sarah Malkin had me.

Alice.

I can't understand why people should interest themselves in such trifles.

Emily.

Oh! I can. I'm awfully interested. Then, you see, Mr Emery has never been engaged before, and he's getting on.

Alice.

He's only thirty-two.

Emily.

Well, isn't that old? And every girl in Bursley has set her cap at Mr Emery.

Alice.

Who says that?

Emily.

I heard Miss Dobson say it this morning. You know at recess, how she turns her back on the school to swallow her nasty raw egg. Well, she was talking to Miss Brunt this morning—I was cleaning the blackboard—and she said (*imitating a middle-aged spinster swallowing a raw egg at one gulp*): "Every girl in Bursley has set her cap at Ralph Emery." And Miss Brunt said: "Except her."

Alice.

"Except her"?

Emily.

Except you, goose.

Alice.

I should think so indeed !

Emily.

Shall I have to call him "Ralph" ?

Alice.

Who ? Mr Emery ? Whatever do you mean ?

Emily.

Don't pretend. Alice ! . . . I'm sure I shall never dare to call him Ralph. (*Pause.*) I say, Alice, *are* you in love with him ? I do wish you'd be decent and tell me.

Alice.

I do wish you'd be decent and finish your lessons.

Emily.

I've finished them . . . . *I* am, anyhow, and I don't care who knows it.

Alice.

You are what ?

Emily.

In love with him, of course.

Alice.

It seems to me it's about time you went to bed.

Emily (*ignoring this remark, half to herself*).

There's no doubt it *is* an extraordinary affair. There's no doubt Mr Emery is considered a frightful swell at Sunday School, and chapel too.

Alice.

I wish you wouldn't use such words, Emily.

Emily.

But he *is*. Just compare him to us ! And then *you're* different, too, from other girls, somehow. And then father's so rich, it seems. I say, Alice !

Alice.

Well ?

Emily.

What will father say ?

Alice.

If you keep on——

Emily.

He's bound to make a row at first, naturally. Oh my ! Squalls ! But I rather fancy he would like you to marry Mr—— Why *do* people get married, Alice ?

Alice.

I suppose because they want to.

Emily.

Why did father get married ? I'm sure *he* never wanted to.

Alice.

He must have done, or he wouldn't have married twice.

Emily.

How often can a man be married ?

Alice.

As often as he likes—that is, if his wives die.

Emily.

Henry the Sixth had eight wives.

Alice.

No, Henry the Eighth had six wives.

Emily.

Oh well, it's all the same. Could a man be married twenty times ?

Alice.

Yes.

Emily.

Could he be married twenty-five times ?

Alice.

Emily ! For goodness' sake be quiet and put your books away, do !

Emily.

I wonder if father will marry again, when you're married.

Alice.

I'm not married yet, so don't worry.

Emily.

For some things I shouldn't like him to, because I shall want to keep house, and I shouldn't care to have a strange woman about the place. But then, supposing he did marry, then his wife might have a little baby, same as my mother had

me, and I should be at least fifteen years older than her ; and I should bring her up, like you brought me up.

Alice.

Then the little baby's mother would have to be dead ?

Emily.

Of course ! She'd die like the others did.

Alice.

Emily, what a child you are !

Emily (*hurt*).

No, I'm not. And I want to keep house. I hate lessons. I shall ask father to let me leave school at Christmas. I'm fourteen.

Alice.

But you're very young for your years.

Emily (*insulted, weeps*).

I'm not ! (*Pitches down a book and upsets flower-vase.*)

Alice (*springing up*).

Quick ! Before father comes !

(*They wipe up the mess.*)

Emily (*hurriedly*).

Here ! Let me ! (*She pins the flower on Alice's bodice.*)

Alice.

What's that for ?

Emily.

You must wear it. *He* might call in to-night. (*A sound.*) My! There he is, I do believe.

Alice (*positively*).

No. It must be father.

(*Eli Boothroyd enters from the back through the kitchen. He puts his hat on a chair, and sits down to his desk, L., completely ignoring the presence of the two girls. Emily pretends to be occupied in arranging her school-books, while Alice busily resumes her mending.*)

Emily (*timidly*).

Father. (*No answer.*) Father.

Alice (*warningly*).

Hsh!

Emily (*whispering to Alice*).

No. I shall ask him. (*Goes up to her father.*) Father.

Eli.

What?

Emily.

Can't I leave school at Christmas?

Eli.

Out of me sight! (*Motioning her to retire and cease from worrying him. He takes a lot of papers from a pigeon-hole.*)

Emily.

But can't I? I'm fourteen, father.

Eli.

Get to bed !

Emily.

But, father——

Eli (*turning on her, furious, ana shouting*).

Get to bed !

(*Exit Emily, crestfallen, and near to tears. Silence. Alice rises after a moment to follow Emily.*)

Eli.

Where are ye going ?

Alice.

To look after Emily.

Eli.

Come here. I want ye.

Alice.

Yes, father.

Eli (*staring at her*).

What's that flower ?

Alice.

Emily gave it me this morning. Haven't you seen it in the vase all day ?

Eli.

Happen I have, happen I haven't. Where did her get it from ?

Alice.

She bought it in the market for a penny.

Eli.

Where did her get the penny from ?

Alice.

She says you gave it her last Christmas.

Eli (*searching his memory and scratching his head, then quite brightly*).

Eh ! I believe I did. (*More severely.*) So her's taken to giving ye flowers ?

Alice.

It's my birthday, and she wanted to give me something.

Eli.

Hum ! And why are ye wearing it to-night ?

Alice.

She just put it in my dress (*smiles faintly and turns away*).

Eli.

Here.

Alice.

Yes, father.

Eli.

I want you. Bring that chair and sit ye down here. (*Alice obeys.*) So it's yer birthday ? Ye thought ye'd remind me of it, eh ?

Alice.

No. I only——

Eli.

I didn't want no reminding. How old are ye ?

Alice.

Twenty-five.

Eli.

Ay! Ye're twenty-five. Well, lass, I've gotten something for ye.

Alice.

For me, father?

Eli.

Yer mother had a fortune of her own, and under yer grandfeyther's will it comes to you when ye're twenty-five. I'm th' trustee. Yer mother had eighteen thousand pounds in government stock. Yer grandfeyther had a fancy for government stock (*sneeringly*). That was above twenty-five year ago. I've nigh on trebled it for ye, what with good investments and interest accumulating. Ye're worth this day as near fifty thousand as makes no matter, lass. And that's a tidy bit.

Alice.

Fifty thousand *pounds*?

Eli.

Ay!

Alice.

Do you mean it's mine, father?

Eli.

It's yours, under yer grandfeyther's will, haven't I told ye? I'm bound by law for to give it ye this day, and ye must sign me a receipt

in due form for th' securities. Here they are. Ye must sign the transfers as well. I've put yer name in pencil, see? Here's th' list. Read it and I'll check off.

Alice (*reading*).

Toft End Colliery and Brickworks Limited. Five hundred shares of ten pounds.

Eli (*passing document, which she signs*).

They paid ten per cent. last year, and with coal up they'll pay fiftane this. Let's see what yer arithmetic is worth, lass. How much is fiftane per cent. on five thousand pun?

Alice (*after thinking uncertainly*).

Seven hundred and fifty.

Eli (*beaming*).

Good! Recollect that's more till two pun a day. Have ye signed the transfer? Well, go on.

Alice.

North Staffordshire Railway ordinary stock, ten thousand two hundred pounds.

Eli.

Right! (*passing document, which Alice signs*). Th'old North Stafford's getting up in th' world. I bought at 81. They're at 104 now. It will be a five per cent. line yet. Then ye must sell out. Next.

Alice.

Five Towns Waterworks Company Limited consolidated stock, eight thousand five hundred pounds.

Eli.

Here ye are. (*Alice signs.*) That's a tit-bit, lass. Ye can't pick that up on rubbish heaps.

Alice.

Norris's Brewery Limited. Six hundred ordinary shares of ten pounds.

Eli (*passing document*).

Twenty per cent. Twenty per cent. regular! There's nought better. Well, all th' rest is little things. Ye can take 'em on trust. Here! Sign 'em. Hast signed 'em all? (*Alice picks up the last document.*) No occasion to sign that. That's real property.

Alice.

Real property? Isn't the other real?

Eli.

Bricks—and mortar. Not enough mortar. Want's pointing. But us can't afford for point it. That's that pot-bank o' Beach's in Edward Street. Th' rent's a hundred a year—more than th' old ruin's worth. I've put it down at eight hundred, capital value. Not as I'd give that for it myself. Ye wouldn't catch me buying earthenware manufactories. It were yer grandfeyther's buying.

I've tried to sell it, but I've never found a fool big enough. Mester Beach owes ye five quarters' rent—a hundred and twenty-five pounds.

Alice (*astonished*).

Mr Beach owes that ?

Eli.

Ay ! Gad Beach, as gives out hymns at Sunday School of a Sunday.

Alice.

Well ! I never heard of such a thing !

Eli.

Happen not.

Alice.

In debt like that !

Eli.

He'd dance for joy if that was all he owed, I lay ! If young Beach doesn't come up to-night, ye must go down to Edward Street to-morrow.

Alice.

Me ?

Eli.

Ay ! I wrote 'em a letter day afore yesterday saying as they must pay twenty-five pounds to-day, certain, and not a word have I heard ! You must get it out of 'em. Th' old man'll whine and promise th' money for next month certain. Tell him he promised last month for

this month. He'll ask for repairs. Tell him we'll do th' repairs as soon as he's paid up his arrears, and not afore.

Alice.

But what am I to *say*?

Eli.

Say what I've told ye. Say if he doesn't pay, ye'll make him.

Alice.

But I can't talk to old Mr Beach like that. Won't it be better for you to go, father?

Eli (*curtly*).

Whose property is it? Yours or mine? You've got to learn. Here. Sign this list now. Total face value of the estate, as I value it, forty-eight thousand and fifty pounds, producing a net annual income of three thousand two hundred and ninety pounds. There's not many in this district as has got that to their names, lass—no, nor half that—let 'em be who they will.

Alice.

What am I to do with it all?

Eli.

Do with it? (*Pause.*) *Do* wi' it, did ye say?

Alice.

Yes.

Eli.

Take care of it, my girl. Take care of it. And remember, it's yours. To-morrow, after ye've been to Beach's, you must go to th' bank, and tell Mester Lovatt I've sent ye. There's four hundred pounds i' cash lying there. He'll give ye a cheque-book. I've explained to him all about it. Ye'll have yer own banking account. Be sure ye keep it straight.

Alice.

I shan't know a bit what to do, father, so it's no use talking.

Eli.

I'll learn ye, lass. Here. Take th' pen, and let's have yer receipt. (*She signs. Eli gathers up all the securities and hands them to her.*) That's the lot. Have ye gotten 'em ?

Alice.

Yes.

Eli.

Shall I keep 'em for ye ?

Alice.

Yes, please.

Eli.

Then give 'em to me. (*She does so.*) And when ye've gotten yer cheque-book, ye'd happen better give me that too.

Alice.

Yes, father. (*A bell rings ; she starts.*)

Eli.

That's Rafe Emery.

Alice (*disturbed*).

Suppose it's young Mr Beach about the rent, must I see him? I'd far rather——

Eli.

It's Rafe Emery. I'm expecting him. (*Alice, evidently surprised, slowly goes to door, L.*) Here! I must tell ye summat about Rafe Emery.

Alice.

But he'll be waiting.

Eli.

Let him wait. It's o' this way. Rafe Emery wants a partner with a couple o' thousand pounds, and he come to me. Understand? 'Tis what they call a sleeping partner he's after. I've looked into it, and there's money in it. He's no fool, and he's gotten hold of a good thing. I'm telling ye this, lass, because I haven't two thousand o' my own lying idle just now, and I thought as ye might like th' investment, happen.

Alice.

But, father——

Eli.

Listen. As I've told ye, ye've only four hundred i' the bank, but next week'll see the beginning o' July and dividends a-coming in. (*Bell rings again. Alice moves.*) Hold on! I've

reckoned as ye'll have near on fourtane hundred i' dividends and interest, and I can lend ye a hundred or so, if need be. Not but what you're nigh as well off as yer feyther! But ye'll want every sixpence as ye can scrape together, and so ye must put the screw on Beach's.

Alice.

Of course, if you think it's all right, father, that's enough.

Eli.

An't I telling ye it's all right? (*Bell rings a third time.*) Are ye going to keep Rafe Emery waiting at that door all night? (*testily, raising his voice*).

(*Exit Alice, L.*)

(*Eli methodically ties up papers. Sound of talking in the passage outside. Enter Alice, Ralph Emery, and Willie Beach. Eli, without turning to them, continues with the papers.*)

Ralph (*as he enters*).

Beach and I walked up the road together from the teachers' meeting, and it wasn't until we stopped at your door that we found out we were both coming to your house.

Willie (*very nervous*).

Yes, if I'd known, I shouldn't have . . . (*catches Eli's eye*). Good evening, Mr Boothroyd; glad to see you.

Eli (*still busy with papers*).

Are ye?

Ralph (*advancing straight to Eli and shaking hands*).
How do you do, Mr Boothroyd ?

Eli (*shaking hands grimly*).

Well, my lad, I'm pigging on.

Ralph (*smiling*).

So you didn't come to the teachers' meeting, Miss Boothroyd ?

Alice.

No. I didn't think I should be any use. Do sit down, please. (*Ralph sits.*) Have that chair, Mr Willie.

Willie (*very nervously taking the chair near Eli which Alice has just quitted*).

Thank you.

Alice (*after a silence*).

And what have you been doing at the teachers' meeting ?

Ralph.

Well, my appointment as afternoon superintendent has been confirmed. And Willie here is to be the afternoon secretary, so that the name of Beach will still be on the roll of officers. Mr Boothroyd, I've always meant to ask you why you never do anything for the Bursley Circuit. You used to be very active in the Hanbridge Circuit when you lived there.

Eli.

Ay ! I cleared 'em o' debt in ten years—but they've slipped into th' ditch again since I left, according to all accounts. There's some as like being in debt.

Ralph.

And why don't you help us here ?

Eli (*grimly*).

Because I don't want to put you out o' work. (*To Willie, suddenly*) Now, young man, what's your business ?

Willie (*starting*).

Father asked me to call about—er—your letter.

Eli.

It's none too early. Well, that's my daughter's affair. Ye know as the works belongs to her, don't ye ? Her'll attend to ye. Mister Emery, you and me have got several things to talk over. Come along o' me into th' other room, will ye ?

Ralph.

With pleasure, Mr Boothroyd.

Alice.

But, father——

Eli.

Father what ? Don't ye know yer own business ?

Ralph (*to Alice, with a friendly gesture*).

See you again. (*Exeunt Eli and Ralph, R.*)

Willie.

So you're looking after your own property now, Miss Boothroyd! Getting quite the business lady! And yet it only seems yesterday that I used to see you every morning going to school.

Alice (*smiling*).

I didn't know you used to see me every morning going to school.

Willie.

Oh yes. However, that's neither here nor there. (*Pause.*) Is it? (*Pause.*) I hear there is to be a partnership between Mr Emery and your father. Or is it you? There's a lot of talk.

Alice (*not curtly, but diffidently*).

Really!

Willie.

Hope I haven't said too much. Smart man of business, Mr Emery. Now, you should see *his* works. Not much bigger than ours, but all the latest dodges with steam, you know. And not heavily rented, I'm told. A manufacturer couldn't help making money there. But *our* works, Miss Boothroyd, or rather yours—well—it wants mending with a new one.

Alice (*firmly*).

But how can you *expect* us to keep it in repair, Mr Willie, when you don't pay the rent?

Willie (*nervously*).

Don't pay the rent?

Alice.

Of course I'm quite fresh to it. Father only told me to-day that you owe one hundred and twenty-five pounds—that's over a year's rent. I must say I was astounded.

Willie (*daunted by her tone*).

Yes, I know, I know. We admit all that. The fact is, father has sent me up to say that he couldn't pay the twenty-five pounds that Mr Boothroyd wanted to-day. We haven't got it, father and I. But we can promise you twenty-five pounds certain for next month.

Alice.

You promised that last month, Mr Willie.

Willie (*anxiously propitiatory*).

I know we did. I'll not deny that. But we've been disappointed. To tell you the truth, one of our best customers put us off at the last moment. It nearly killed the old dad. I assure you (*pleadingly*) money's very tight, very tight indeed. It's got to be give-and-take in these days, Miss Boothroyd ; your father knows that.

Alice (*in a softer tone*).

He said I was to be sure and get something on account. And really I think——

Willie (*appealingly*).

Miss Boothroyd, we can't give you anything on account just now. Neither your father nor any-

body can get it out of us, because we haven't got it. Do you know what my poor old dad would do if he took my advice? He'd go bankrupt.

Alice (*shocked*).

Go bankrupt? And not pay his debts?

Willie.

Yes. I should give in. But he won't. He's too proud. He always says we shall pull through. But shall we pull through? That works is like a millstone round our necks.

Alice (*stiffly*).

But why don't you leave the works, and find another one?

Willie (*trying to be firm, but not able to drop his appealing manner*).

Because we can't leave it. Because you won't let us leave it till we've paid up all our arrears; and we can't pay up. As my old dad said the other day: "You've got us like a fly on a pin" (*smiles painfully*).

Alice (*troubled*).

But, after all, business is business, Mr Willie. You took the works. You agreed to pay the rent.

Willie (*anxiously propitiatory again*).

True. That's quite true. But (*smiling timidly*) your father's a cleverer man than my old dad.

Alice.

What do you mean?

Willie.

Oh, nothing! Only the lease is all in your favour, that's all: so the dad says. The dad says he wanted that works too badly twenty years ago, and Mr Boothroyd got too much out of him. You see, the dad had worked at the bench till then, and he'd saved money, and he was just setting up for himself. The rent was too high from the start. And times are changed since then. You should see a modern works. (*Watching Alice's face, he adds, a little cringingly*) But of course we agreed to the rent, and we must stand by it.

Alice.

I see.

Willie (*emboldened*).

Yes, if I had my way we'd go bankrupt. As you say, business is business. There are people in this town that say that bankruptcy is good business.

Alice.

But wouldn't you pay your debts, Mr Willie?

Willie (*with a hesitating smile*).

Yes, I would. Every penny. But we shall never do any good until we start again, and we can't start again without filing our petition. Afterwards—we'd pay.

Alice.

I'm glad you think like that.

Willie (*eager to assure her*).

Oh, of course I think like that. But what are we to do as we are? Things are all in a knot. The works is out of date and out of repair. That's the reason we're in debt. You say you can't spend money on it till we pay up our arrears. I quite understand that, quite. But we can't pay up our arrears till you spend money on it. It's a deadlock. (*Pause*; *he becomes bolder*) It's killing the old dad. Why has he resigned from the Sunday School? Simply because the strain of everything is getting above his strength.

Alice (*impressed*).

What do you propose to do, then? . . . I'm very sorry.

Willie (*eagerly*).

We'll pay you twenty-five pounds next month; it's a certainty. Our best customer won't put us off twice.

Alice.

Then you don't really want to go bankrupt? (*with a faint smile*).

Willie.

I'm thinking of the old dad. Supposing after we'd smashed he couldn't get fresh capital, he'd have to go back to the bench. That *would* kill him. No, Miss Boothroyd, I'll promise you twenty-five pounds faithful for next month. Will you accept that?

Alice.

I must ask father.

Willie.

I thought it was your affair. He said so.

Alice.

Yes, but he settles it.

Willie (*smiling persuasively*).

Nay, nay. I heard him myself say it was your business. Now, Miss Boothroyd, don't be hard on us.

Alice.

I don't want to be hard, Mr Willie. I'll wait —if father agrees. You promise positively?

Willie (*excitedly*).

Oh, positively! I'm sure we're very much obliged to you. I'm glad it's in your hands now. I'm glad you see our arguments. I'll go and tell the old dad at once—he'll be waiting. Thank you (*seizing his hat*). Good night.

Alice.

I think you had better just speak to father first.

Willie (*frightened*).

No, no. I mustn't stop. (*Shakes hands.*) Thanks again. Good night.

Alice (*as he goes*).

But——

(*Willie nods and exit, L. Alice goes to door after him, but he lets himself out at the front door, which bangs, before she can get into the passage. She returns to the middle of the room.*)

(*Enter Eli and Ralph, R.*)

Eli.

Well! How much have ye gotten out of him?

Alice.

They'll pay next month. They really can't——

Eli (*loudly*).

What! (*Ralph, who has hesitated in the doorway leading to the other room, discreetly retires.*) What's that ye tell me? What did I tell ye to say?

Alice.

But, father, he explained all about the works. You yourself said the rent was too high.

Eli (*coldly threatening*).

Ye didn't let on to him as I said that?

Alice.

No. One of their best customers has failed them.

Eli.

That tale again! Dost mean to tell me as ye've let 'em off for a month?

Alice.

What else could I do? If they can't pay, they can't pay.

Eli.

Bosh! In course they can pay. Ye'll want every penny ye've got to make up the two thou-

sand for Ralph Emery, and ye go and do a thing like this ! And without consulting me !

Alice.

I only promised for myself. I said I must ask you. But they can't pay. You'll only drive them into bankruptcy. It's killing old Mr Beach. That's why he's left the Sunday School.

Eli (*laughing*).

It'll take more than that to kill *him*. (*Looks at his watch.*) Sit down at yon desk.

Alice.

What am I to do ?

Eli.

Sit down. (*She does so. He opens a drawer.*) Here's paper (*flinging it down*). And here's an envelope (*flinging it down*). And here's a pen (*flinging it down*). Write and tell 'em as we must have twenty-five pounds to-morrow and another twenty-five pounds next month.

Alice.

But, father——

Eli.

Can ye write or can't ye ?

Alice.

What must I say ?

Eli.

Ye were at school six years. Tell 'em what I've told ye.

Alice.

What date is it?

Eli.

Sixth o' May. (*He walks about while she writes.*) A nice kettle o' fish! All th' usual excuses! Old hypocrite! Good thing he did resign! People as can't pay twenty shillings in the pound have no business in Sunday Schools. (*Looks over Alice's shoulder, and reads*) "Dear Sir, I have spoken to father about the rent, and he says we must have £25 to-morrow without fail." That's right. "And £25 next month" (*she writes*). That'll do. Sign it "Yours truly." Now th' envelope. (*He takes a stamp from his thick pocket book.*) Hold on (*as she is folding up letter*). Put a *P.S.*: "In case of default we shall distrain."

Alice.

Distrain?

Eli.

Ay. Distrain.

Alice.

But——

Eli.

Write it, I say. (*Alice hesitates and obeys, and puts letter in envelope.*) Put "local" at bottom o' th' envelope. Give it me. I'll post it myself. I shall be just in time. We'll soon see if he means bankruptcy or not! My hat! (*Alice picks up his hat and holds it for him while he puts stamp on envelope.*)

(*Exit Eli, through kitchen.*)

(*Alice hears a movement in room, R., and runs after her father, into the kitchen.*)

Alice (*calling out*).

Father, what about Mr Emery? You're forgetting he's waiting for you.

(*Enter Ralph, R.*)

Alice (*returning from the kitchen.*)

Oh, Mr Emery, father's gone off in such a hurry to catch the post that I believe he's forgotten you. I——

Ralph (*diffidently*).

Really! He's just been telling me that it is you who are to be my partner. I'd no idea of such a thing. Of course, I'm very glad.

Alice (*after a pause*).

I only heard to-night, too. He was explaining to me about it when you and Willie Beach came in.

Ralph.

I hope you didn't mind me coming to-night.

Alice.

Mind?

Ralph.

You got my letter this morning?

Alice (*sitting down*).

Yes.

Ralph.

Well, after me saying definitely in that letter that I should not call until I heard from you, it must seem queer to you, me dropping in like this. But I assure you I couldn't help it. Your father sent for me unexpectedly, and I couldn't very well get out of it.

Alice.

Yes.

Ralph.

I hope you weren't annoyed at my writing.

Alice.

Oh, no! You explained everything so well.

Ralph.

The fact is, I felt I could do it so much better in writing.

Alice.

Yes, you said so.

Ralph.

And if I have something to do I always like it to be done as well as *I* can do it. When I came in here to-night I scarcely knew where to look. I was wondering whatever you would think of me. You must have noticed it.

Alice.

No, I assure you I noticed nothing of the kind. And I'm glad you did call.

Ralph.

Why?

Alice.

I always prefer to have things settled at once.

Ralph.

But have you——

Alice.

I've thought it over very carefully and——

Ralph (*suddenly very excited, and speaking very quickly*).

Now, if you're going to say no, please don't say it now. Leave it for a day or two. Write it. I can't stand it now—I feel I can't, especially after your father telling me you are to be my partner in the business. I—I—— (*stops*).

Alice.

But I'm not going to say no.

Ralph.

What—what——

Alice.

That's why I'm glad you called. If I'd been meaning to say no, I shouldn't have been glad, should I ?

Ralph (*in a low voice*).

I never thought of that.

(*He advances hesitatingly : then takes her hand, seeming surprised that she permits this liberty ; then, having glanced round the room as if to be sure that they are alone, he kisses her. She kisses him, not with passion, but with*

sincerity. The preliminaries to the kiss have occupied some time, but, immediately the kiss accomplished, Ralph draws away, satisfied, and sits down on a chair close to Alice. Then he reaches out and takes her hand again and holds it.)

Ralph.

Doesn't it seem very strange to you ?

Alice.

What ?

Ralph.

That we should be engaged.

Alice.

It doesn't seem real.

Ralph.

No. That's how I feel. But it *is*, you know. . . . It will create some sensation in old Bursley.

Alice.

From what Emily tells me, it has already caused a fine lot of talking.

Ralph.

Our engagement ! Us ? But no one could possibly have guessed anything. I've been most careful.

Alice.

The fact is, if people haven't got something to talk about, they'll find something. It's simply disgraceful.

Ralph.

But what did Emily tell you? I can't imagine what people *could* say.

Alice.

No, neither can I. Emily merely said that we were being talked about a great deal.

Ralph.

Well, well! When was that?

Alice.

This very evening. Of course, the little thing was full of curiosity.

Ralph.

I suppose you didn't tell her I'd written to you?

Alice.

Why, of course not! I told her nothing whatever. She *will* be in a state when she knows.

Ralph.

I like Emily.

Alice.

I'm glad you do. She simply worships you.

Ralph (*smiles*).

I can't understand what people could have seen, or thought they'd seen, to justify them. . . . Everybody knew I came here on business to see your father. I made no secret of that. But as to anything else—I've never breathed a word to a soul except my aunt.

Alice.

Mrs Copestick ?

Ralph.

Yes. I told her everything. But she'd be the last to gossip. Now, *she's* excited about it, if you like !

Alice.

Is she ?

Ralph.

I should think she was. She admires you tremendously.

Alice.

Admires *me* ?

Ralph.

Yes. Don't you like her ?

Alice.

From what I've seen of her I think she's the finest woman in Bursley.

Ralph.

That's just what she says of you.

Alice.

Mrs Copestick !

Ralph (*after kissing her again*).

I've never failed in anything yet that I set my mind on. But I really couldn't believe I should succeed in this affair. Honestly, it seems more like a dream than anything else. However, I *have* succeeded, and now I'm going ahead with a vengeance. I must tell you all about my plans.

Did you know I'd had an offer to go on the Town Council next year?

Alice.

On the Town Council!

Ralph.

Yes. I shall be mayor one of these days, with you to help me.

Alice.

But I'm only a home-woman. That's what makes me so afraid.

Ralph.

Afraid?

Alice.

Yes. Lest you should be disappointed in me. You're so different from me.

Ralph.

Me disappointed in *you*! No fear. You're the pick of this town, or any other town, for the matter of that. I've not lived to the age of thirty-two for nothing. No, I shall never be disappointed in you. You are equal to anything. And now we're engaged, I feel as if I want to begin to work at once, all afresh, with you.

Alice.

There's no knowing when we can be married.

Ralph.

Why?

Alice (*hesitatingly*).

Father will not want us to——

Ralph (*interrupting her*).

Don't trouble about your father. I think I may say the old gentleman has taken a fancy to me. I'm pretty sure he'll raise no objection to our being engaged.

Alice.

No, not to our being engaged. But he won't want us to be married.

Ralph.

But why not?

Alice.

Oh, I don't know. There'll be no one to look after him. Emily isn't old enough yet.

Ralph.

And is that to stop us from being married? Your father must get a housekeeper.

Alice.

He wouldn't like a housekeeper.

Ralph.

Perhaps not; but we can't help that (*firmly*). There are certain sacrifices that can't be made, and that oughtn't to be made. The date of our marriage is a thing that concerns *us*, and we must settle it. You leave me to arrange matters with your father.

Alice (*with relief and admiration*).

Oh! I shall! I shall leave everything to you. If it was only so that you could look after my

money for me, I would like us not to be too long in being married. How strange it seems to be talking about marriage, and yesterday I wasn't even engaged!

Ralph.

Your money?

Alice.

Yes. Father has told me that I am worth fifty thousand pounds, or nearly. He gave me all the documents. It comes from my mother's father, but father has increased it enormously.

Ralph (*staggered*).

Fifty thousand—pounds! (*involuntarily looking round at the poverty of the room*).

Alice.

Nearly.

Ralph.

Why! Sir Thomas Wilbraham didn't leave that much!

Alice.

I don't know anything about what Sir Thomas Wilbraham left. But father gave me all the papers and things. Surely you knew I had money?

Ralph.

I knew you were finding two thousand pounds for my business. But fifty!

Alice.

Well, I was rather surprised myself.

Ralph (*bursting out into sudden laughter at her matter-of-fact tone*).

I see you have no notion of what fifty thousand pounds is. Do you know it probably means an income of between fifteen hundred and two thousand a year ?

Alice (*calmly*).

Father said three thousand.

Ralph (*speechless for a moment*).

Well, of all the—— ! And it's yours in your own right ? He's given you the securities ?

Alice.

Yes, but I gave them back to him to keep.

Ralph.

Oh !

Alice.

I don't know anything about that sort of thing. And, you see, father does what he likes, naturally ; only he makes me do it.

Ralph.

What do you mean ?

Alice.

Well, to-night, for instance. Over Beach's works——

Ralph.

You own that, do you ?

Alice.

Yes. I *must* tell you about it (*rather apologetically*).

Ralph.

Do, do. (*He is still in a state of amazement.*)

Alice.

They're in arrear with their rent.

Ralph.

I'm not surprised. I noticed there was something in the air this evening. So that was it.

Alice (*hurt by his tone, which implies contemptuous criticism of the Beaches*).

But they can't help it. Willie Beach has explained it all to me. And yet father is forcing me to put the screw on terribly. I'm sure that I should have been very much upset about it indeed, if I hadn't had—er—other things to think about.

Ralph (*smiling indulgently, and kissing her*).

Your father's quite right, but of course he ought to do the screwing himself.

Alice.

But Willie Beach said it was killing Mr Beach.

Ralph.

Not it! However, don't worry. Leave all that to——

Alice.

There's father. I can hear him bolting the back gate.

Ralph.

I must go.

Alice.

But shan't you . . . ?

Ralph (*with an air of calm*).

No, I must go. I couldn't talk to him to-night. I'm really very much—I'm not at all myself. Will you kindly tell your father that I shall call on him on a most important matter at (*consulting his pocket-book*) six o'clock to-morrow, precisely ? Will that do ? (*Alice nods. He half whispers to her.*) Quick !

(*Exeunt together, L. Noise of front-door, etc. Re-enter Alice. At the same moment Eli enters from the kitchen.*)

Alice.

Father, you haven't given me the two shilling for the school-treat tickets.

(*Eli ignores her remark. He goes to desk and arranges his papers. Alice arranges her mending on a basket.*)

Eli (*after an interval*).

Where's young Emery ?

Alice.

He's gone.

(*They continue their respective tasks, and Eli locks up documents in a drawer in the lower part of the desk. Then he closes the lid of the desk with a bang.*)

Eli.

What in the name of fortune do ye want with school-treats ?

Alice.

It's for Emily, of course. She can't go alone. Besides, as a teacher, I'm supposed to go.

Eli.

Two shillings, did ye say ?

Alice.

Yes.

Eli.

Here's eighteenpence. I'll give ye th' other sixpence to-morrow. But I don't hold with it, mind ye. (*Throws down money crossly*).

Alice.

Thank you.

Eli (*his hand on the gas-tap*).

Now then, bed !

Alice.

Father, Ralph Emery has asked me to marry him.

Eli (*his hand still on the gas-tap*).

Asked ye to marry him, has he ?

Alice.

Yes, father.

Eli.

And what didst say ?

Alice.

I said I would.

Eli.

Oh ! ye said ye would !

Alice.

And he's coming up to see you at six o'clock to-morrow.

Eli.

Then I am for be consulted, eh ?

Alice.

Of course, father.

Eli.

Ye've soon made it up betwane ye. (*Pause.*)

Alice.

You like Ralph, don't you, father ?

Eli.

I don't know as I like him. I'm not specially given to liking people. But he's a hard-headed chap, and he knows the value o' money (*with emphasis*). Ay ! that he does ! He knows which side his bread's buttered on.

Alice.

What do you mean, father ?

Eli.

Ye know well enough what I'm at, lass. Dost think he isn't marrying ye for th' brass? Dost think as he can't make a fine guess what ye're worth? But that won't bother ye so long as ye've hooked a good-looking chap.

Alice.

Father!

Eli.

Ay, ye may bridle, but it's true. Don't tell me!

Alice.

I'm sure he never——

Eli.

Less gab! He isn't a fool. (*A pause.*) Ye're free to wed for me, when ye're old enough. Lasses will do it, I reckon, and you among th' rest. (*He turns out the gas.*) Bed!

Alice.

Good-night, father.

(*Curtain.*)

ACT II

Same scene. The remains of tea are on the table.
William Beach has just entered and is talking alone with Alice.
Time: The next day.

Willie.

We were relying on your promise, Miss Boothroyd.

Alice.

I'm very sorry, Mr Willie, but I told you last night that I could settle nothing without father.

Willie.

You said you would wait.

Alice (*slightly hurt, protesting firmly*).

I said, "if father agrees."

Willie (*cringingly*).

Certainly you did, certainly! I fully admit that. But it places us in a very awkward position. Father was just as much surprised as I was to receive your letter.

(*The door R. opens and then half closes again, uncertainly.*)

Alice (*very kindly*).

I'm sorry——

Willie (*taking courage*).

In fact, I don't mind telling you, Miss Boothroyd, that father said he had never received such a letter in the whole of his business career.

Alice (*monotonously*).

Of course, as I say, I'm entirely in my father's hands.

Willie.

We quite understand that. But all we want is time. The fact is that business is getting brisker, and if we are given time——

Alice.

But father means what he says.

Willie (*with a servility which pains Alice*).

He means what he says, and I admire him for it. It's just a matter of business. We owe a debt and we must pay it. But surely a week or two won't make all that difference——

(*Enter Eli, R.*)

Eli (*in a very benevolent voice*).

Well, young sir. Can't you and Alice settle your affairs between you? What's amiss?

Willie (*misled by Eli's tone*).

Good morning, Mr Boothroyd. I called about your letter.

Eli.

My daughter's letter? (*smiling*).

Willie (*half boldly, half timidly*).

I have been telling Miss Boothroyd that father said he had never received such a letter in the whole of his business career.

Eli (*bluntly*).

Yer father's had dozens o' such letters in his time, lad. Are ye going to tell me as Gad Beach has never heard o' a bum-bailiff before ?

Willie (*craven at once*).

Come, Mr Boothroyd, please don't talk like that. All we want is time.

Eh.

Time is money, and if we give ye time we give ye money. 'Stead o' that, it's you as must give us money. That's right reason.

Willie (*with a pathetic appeal*).

Mr Boothroyd, we can't give you money. We shall have money, but we haven't got it now. Business is brisking up, and prices too—father was very hopeful indeed this morning. Give us a little time and we shall pull through. If you don't——(*He stops.*)

Eli (*calmly*).

Well, if we don't, what then ?

Willie (*after a pause*).

But you will. You really must (*cajolingly*).

Eli.

Listen here, young man. Do you remember what my daughter wrote to you last night ?

Willie.

Yes. I've got the letter in my pocket.

Eli.

Read it, then.

Willie.

Need I ? (*hesitatingly*).

Eli (*loudly*).

Let's hear it.

Willie (*taking the crumpled letter from his pocket and reading*).

" I have spoken to father about the rent, and he says we must have twenty-five pounds to-morrow without fail, and twenty-five pounds next month.—Yours truly, A. Boothroyd. *P.S.*—In case of default we shall distrain." (*Folds up and re-pockets letter.*)

Eli.

That's plain enough, isn't it ?

Willie (*to Alice*).

But you promised me last night——

Alice (*hastily*).

Subject to what father said.

Eli.

Have ye brought th' money ?

Willie.

I tell you we haven't it.

Eli.

Have ye brought it ?

Willie.

No.

Eli.

Shall ye pay it to-day ?

Willie.

No, we can't.

Eli (*with a laugh*).

That's all right, then. Now we understand each other.

Willie (*frightened*).

What are you going to do ?

Eli.

We're going to put bums in. We shall see what you'll do. We shall see what your word's worth (*turning aside*).

Willie (*frantically*).

Mr Boothroyd, I appeal to you ! Miss Boothroyd——

Eli.

We've got to have our money.

Willie.

You'll ruin us.

Eli.

And what about you ruining us ?

Willie.

When shall you distrain ?

Eli.

To-morrow.

Willie.

Now, Mr Boothroyd, will you listen to reason ? I've a proposition to make to you.

Eli.

Now ye're talking. I thought bums 'ud shift ye.

Willie (*with a servile, difficult smile*).

We can't offer you money, but we can offer you something as good.

Eli.

I've ne'er met with it.

Willie.

I've got a bill of exchange here, drawn by us on Catlings and accepted by them.

Eli.

What—Catlings, London ?

Willie.

Yes. They're customers of ours. Of course, we only get a small bit of their trade, but they're doing more with us now than they did. This is a bill at three months, and it matures at the end of

this month. It's for thirty pounds, and you only asked for twenty-five pounds. Will you take it?

Eli.

Let's see it.

Willie (*handing the bill*).

Oh! Catlings are all right. Remember, I'm offering you thirty pounds, and you only asked for twenty-five pounds. I must tell you that father would want you not to put the bill into circulation. We have an understanding with Catlings not to part with their bills. Father was very reluctant, and told me to try everything first. We naturally don't want to offend a good regular customer. However, for this once. . . . Of course, we shall redeem it before it matures.

Eli (*with an expression of assumed simplicity*).

So this bit o' paper's worth nought till th' end o' th' month.

Willie.

Will you take it?

Eli.

Nay, you must ask Alice.

Willie (*eagerly to Alice*).

It's for thirty pounds, and you only ask for twenty-five pounds.

Alice.

Certainly, if father is agreeable.

Willie.

It's settled, then?

Eli (*reluctantly*).

Ay.

Willie.

And you won't discount it ?

Eli.

We'll oblige ye.

Willie.

Thank you, thank you (*hurrying to go*). You'll see, you'll be paid *before* the end of the month. Well, good afternoon, Mr Boothroyd—good afternoon, Miss Boothroyd (*shaking hands in haste and going to door*).

Eli.

Young man !

Willie.

Yes.

Eli.

Tell yer father not to forget as it's quarter-day next month, and there'll be another twenty-five pounds round his neck.

Willie.

Oh, we shan't forget.

(*Exit Willie ; Alice with him to see him out. Alice returns. Eli is putting the bill into a pigeon-hole of his desk.*)

Eli.

What did I tell ye ? He talked to you about bankruptcy, but he didn't talk to me about bankruptcy. He knowed better. Them as can pay

and won't must be made to pay, and there's naught like bums for doing it. (*Pause*; *Alice says nothing.*) A fine state he was in (*laughs*)! He's forgotten to ask for a receipt. (*Another pause.*) You'll have this money plenty in time for Ralph Emery. And happen a bit more from 'em. We didn't promise as we wouldn't trouble 'em for a bit extra in a week or two. And we will.

Alice.

Father, how can you?

Eli.

I don't know as I want any sauce from my children.

(*Enter, through kitchen, Emily, followed by Mrs Copestick. All the Boothroyds, including Emily, seem extremely taken aback by the arrival of the visitor, whose demeanour, however, remains perfectly cheerful and matter-of-fact.*)

Mrs Copestick.

Well, Mr Boothroyd, I overtook Emily coming up the road. She said she always came in the back way, so I said I would come in the back way too.

Eli (*shaking hands*).

Bless us! Bless us!

Mrs Copestick (*shaking hands with Alice*).

It's you I've come to see, Miss Alice. As Ralph's aunt and sole surviving relative, I'm here to offer my congratulations. No, that's not what I mean.

He's the one to be congratulated. Anyhow, although I'm only an old woman, and a widow at that, I've come on behalf of the family to—to—well, cry—so I may as well out with it! (*In a little rush of tears, she kisses Alice passionately.*) I'm so happy, my dear girl. (*Alice smiles.*)

Eli.

What's this all about, if I'm not making too bold?

Mrs Copestick.

I suppose you aren't going to deny that your daughter is engaged to my nephew?

Eli.

I've heard naught of it from your nephew.

Mrs Copestick.

But you know he's coming to see you at six o'clock?

Eli.

It's after six now.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes it is. I expected to find Ralph here. Seeing that he's late, Mr Boothroyd, I have the honour to ask you, as the family representative, for your daughter's hand.

Eli.

And supposing I say no?

Mrs Copestick (*sharply*).

Do you say no? Because, if so, I must hurry off.

Eli.

Here. Don't be in such a dust.

Mrs Copestick.

Then you say yes?

Eli.

I don't know as I say anything.

Mrs Copestick.

Then I'll call again when you've made up your mind. (*Her sharp, jocular freedom with Eli almost frightens his daughters.*)

Eli.

Eh, what a pother!

Mrs Copestick.

Then you say yes?

Eli (*after hesitating*).

Ay!

Mrs Copestick.

What a lot of trouble I've saved Ralph! But it's really not quite right of him to be late (*sinking into a chair and fanning herself*). Just a minute. I must recover; Emily's legs are so long.

Emily.

Oh, Mrs Copestick! And I could scarcely keep up with you.

Mrs Copestick.

Well, I confess I'm one of those that go till they drop. I shall beg a cup of tea (*glancing at table*). But you've had tea!

Eli (*quickly to Emily*).

Go, make some fresh tea, child.

(*Emily, startled into activity, runs out.*)

Alice (*as Emily goes out*).

There is hot water in the kettle. Cut some bread-and-butter—thin.

Mrs Copestick.

So it's actually arranged! Ralph called and told me last night. Of course, I'd seen it coming, but somehow it took me as a surprise at the end. And I was so excited, I couldn't sleep a wink all night.

Alice (*timidly*).

Really!

Mrs Copestick.

Really! Wasn't it silly of me! Ralph did say six o'clock, didn't he?

Alice.

Yes.

Mrs Copestick.

It's not like him to be late.

Alice.

No, it isn't.

Mrs Copestick.

I met him in the town this morning, and the last thing he said to me was that he should be here to the minute. If you want to be let into a secret, I was helping him to buy the engagement ring. We went to Bennion's, of course. There's no other what you may call *good* jeweller's in the Five Towns, is there ?

Alice.

I don't know.

Mrs Copestick

It's a beauty, that I will say, though I chose it myself. Eh ! I do hope you'll be happy. I think you will. I'm a great believer in marriage. Aren't you glad it's all so satisfactorily settled, Mr Boothroyd ?

Eli.

Oh ! they will do it, seemingly. I may reckon as I've got one off my hands now. (*Laughs. Enter Emily with tea.*)

Mrs Copestick.

Thank you, my dear. Yes, one lump.

Emily (*to Alice, who is surreptitiously inspecting the bread-and-butter*).

You needn't look, miss. It's thin.

Mrs Copestick.

It's beautiful. (*To Eli*) At any rate, you'll have a housekeeper left. (*Emily beams.*)

Eli (*ignoring this*).

Ay! I may reckon as I've got one off my hands.

Mrs Copestick.

You needn't be such an old cynic. Don't forget you were young yourself once. Do you remember that time when you proposed to me?

Emily (*staggered*).

To you, Mrs Copestick? Father?

Mrs Copestick.

You may well be startled. Fancy anyone proposing to an old thing like me!

Emily (*under her breath*).

It wasn't that.

Mrs Copestick.

But I was only sixteen then.

Eli.

And I was but six-and-twenty. So there was every excuse.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. But supposing I'd accepted you, you'd have had to marry me.

Eli.

Ay! I reckon I should.

Emily.

How lovely! Then you would have been our mother!

Mrs Copestick (*looking at her ; then quickly*).

Will you give me another cup, child? By the way, engagements make one think of wedding presents. I was forgetting a most important part of my visit. Now, Mr Boothroyd, I want you to go out with me.

Eli.

What for ?

Mrs Copestick.

That's a secret. I'll tell you afterwards. Will you come ? (*In a different tone*) I'm not joking.

Eli.

Now ?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, now. Thank you, Emily (*taking cup*).

Eli.

Where to ?

Mrs Copestick.

Hanbridge.

Eli.

I'm all in my dirt.

Mrs Copestick.

You can soon alter that.

Eli.

Must I put my best duds on ? (*half rising*).

Mrs Copestick.

If you like. Some of them.

Eli.

Nay, I've nought but one suit.

Mrs Copestick.

That'll be enough.

Eli (*rising*).

Well, here goes.

Mrs Copestick (*negligently*).

Don't be long.

(*Exit Eli, who re-enters immediately.*)

Eli.

Emily, get my boots dusted, and then come upstairs and brush my coat.

Emily (*unaffectedly astounded.*)

Yes, father.

(*Exeunt Eli and Emily.*)

Alice (*after a little pause*).

It's queer, Ralph being so late, isn't it?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, I had hoped to see him. But I shan't wait. I've got a lot to do, and I shan't wait, so Ralph needn't think it (*with a laugh; then suddenly approaching Alice.*) My dear, I hope you and I will become great friends. We ought to, as we're both so fond of the same man (*with a twinkle*). I'm (*hesitating—half pathetically*) very young, really! I have always liked you, and I can't *tell* you how glad I am for Ralph's sake that he's

been clever enough to get you. He's a thoroughly good boy, though he can't always see a joke. And he's sensible, and you're sensible too, and in my opinion there is nothing like common-sense for being happy. . . . You *are* a sensible girl, aren't you?

Alice.

I hope so.

Mrs Copestick.

I only ask because I'm sure you are, and because—Alice—I suppose I may as well begin calling you Alice at once, mayn't I?—I don't think you're being so frightfully sensible just now. He's late, I know. But you mustn't fret about that. He's bound to be here soon. Why, you've been nearly crying! Excuse me, but I like you, and, besides, I always blurt things out like that. You must remember that a man may be detained by a hundred things, and it's only a little more than half-past six now.

Alice (*eagerly*).

Oh, Mrs Copestick, I never thought of such a thing! I assure you I've not been worrying one little bit about Ralph. I didn't dream of it! Of course he's been kept at the works.

Mrs Copestick.

Forgive me, my dear; I'm a foolish old woman. I really imagined you were—well, pouting! I imagined Ralph's being late had touched your

pride. And very natural that would have been, too, considering what Ralph is coming up for!

Alice.

How funny you should have thought that! It never entered my head.

Mrs Copestick.

Then let me ask what *is* worrying you, my dear girl? You ought not to be worrying at such a time as this. Do let me ask.

Alice (*receding at first from this direct attack on her secretiveness*).

Oh! It's——it's——

Mrs Copestick.

No, perhaps I ought not to intrude.

Alice.

Yes, I shall tell you. I would like to tell you. It's about business.

Mrs Copestick.

Oh!

Alice.

You know I'm the owner of old Mr Beach's works in Edward Street. Well, they're in difficulties, and, of course, I have to do as father tells me. And father *will* have people paying their debts. I believe in people paying their debts, too. It's really most painful—painful! We've just had Willie Beech up here. And I've been feeling so humiliated.

Mrs Copestick.

But why should you feel humiliated ?

Alice.

It always humiliates me to see other people humiliated. Oh ! (*with a little shudder*) when they cringe . . . ! It's no use—I can't help it. And Willie Beach is such a boy ! I used to see him passing every morning when he went to school, and he looks to me just the same now as he did then. He's so simple. And he comes up here to make excuses. And father is hard upon him—and it's all on my account. . . . He's most pathetic.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. I know what you mean. It's his blue eyes.

Alice.

His blue eyes ?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. If he was dark the effect would be quite different. Well, I hope the difficulty was arranged ?

Alice.

Yes, it's arranged, I'm thankful to say.

Mrs Copestick.

My dear, let me take the liberty of warning you against being too sensitive. I expect your father didn't demand anything but what was properly due. He was always one of the straightest men I ever met.

Alice.

Oh no! But it upset me. And as you mentioned it, I'm telling you, that's all.

Mrs Copestick.

And I'm very much obliged to you for your confidence. But let me give you a bit of advice. Be careful of your pity. Don't be extravagant with it. . . . There's a time for everything. Instead of worrying about Willie Beach, you ought to be revelling in your engagement.

Alice.

I *am* revelling in my engagement. I'm awfully proud about it. But I'm always so sorry for—failures, you know. And those Beaches seem so helpless. . . . (*Quickly*) But what you say is quite right, and I'm glad I told you.

(*Enter Eli and Emily.*)

Eli (*arrayed*).

Now, missis, will this do?

Mrs Copestick.

I haven't seen you look so nice since I don't know when. (*Aside to Alice, in a voice which Eli can hear*) Must flatter them! (*Looking at her watch*) I can't wait a moment longer for Ralph. What about a car?

Eli.

Emily, run into th' front room and see if th' Hanbridge car is coming.

(*Exit Emily, R.*)

Mrs Copestick.

After we've been to Hanbridge I have to go up to Toft End to see Miranda Finney.

Alice.

What, the Beaches' old servant?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. She sent me word down this morning her rheumatism was very bad again. So I suppose I must climb up all that hill and comfort her. I daresay she's in a fine mess.

Eli.

Now, missis, what about this here Hanbridge picnic as you're taking me to?

Mrs Copestick.

Well, it's about a wedding present for these two. There's a really magnificent dining-room suite for sale second-hand at Scarratt's. I saw it this morning with Ralph. And I want to buy it before it's gone. It's more than I can afford, but——

Alice.

Oh, Mrs Copestick, you're too kind——

Mrs Copestick.

Tut-tut! (*To Eli*) But I thought you might join me in it. You're her father and I'm *his* mother—almost. Of course, it will make no difference to your *own* present to dear Alice.

Eli (*drawing back*).

Nay, nay! I'll have nought to do with it. What does th' wench want wi' presents?

(*Enter Emily, R.*)

Emily.

The car's coming—the car's coming.

Mrs Copestick.

Come, Mr Boothroyd. Good-bye, Alice (*kisses her*). Tell Ralph I waited as long as I could.

Alice.

But, father, he's coming to see you.

Mrs Copestick.

That doesn't matter. I've settled that part of the business. And if I'd had the ring I'd have put *that* on, too. Come, Mr Boothroyd. Good-bye, dear (*kissing Emily*).

Alice.

Good afternoon. This way, Mrs Copestick (*indicating door, L.*).

Emily.

Good afternoon.

(*Exeunt Eli and Mrs Copestick. Emily watches them out from the door, L., then returns into the room. Rumble of passing car.*)

Emily.

Well! I never saw the like of it!

Alice.

The like of what ?

Emily.

She simply orders him about. He sent me to bed last night, and he was awfully glumpy all to-day—and immediately she comes in he's as right as ninepence. And fancy him changing his coat, and his collar, to go out with her ! He must be fond of her.

Alice.

Everyone is.

Emily.

Yes, but I don't mean like that. I can't imagine father young, can you ? . . . Isn't it strange she's never called here before ?

Alice.

No one ever does call here.

Emily.

No. You could have knocked me down with a feather when she asked for some tea. And then, the way father sent me out to make it ! Now I suppose we shall always be having callers.

Alice.

Why ?

Emily.

Well, won't *he* be calling ?

Alice.

Oh yes.

Emily.

Will he stay for meals ?

Alice.

I don't know. Nothing has been said about it.

Emily.

I simply ask because there's only cheese for supper. I say, Alice, did he kiss you ?

Alice.

Who ?

Emily.

Alice ! Ralph, of course, when he asked you. What did he say ? I do so want to know, and you've told me *nothing*.

Alice.

You'd better ask him.

Emily.

You are horrid, Alice. (*Half to herself*) But it's a queer beginning for an engagement.

Alice.

How a queer beginning for an engagement ?

Emily.

Well, he says he shall be here at six with the engagement ring, and it's now a quarter to seven, and not a sign of him. Somehow, your engagement doesn't seem like a real engagement. The first call, and he's late ! (*A bell is heard.*) There he is !

Alice.

Well, run along.

Emily.

Must I call him Ralph? I can't. I shall never dare.

Alice.

Don't be silly. Run along and open the door.

Emily.

Suppose he wants to kiss me?

Alice.

Oh dear!

(*Exit, Alice L. Emily approaches the door, L.; then thinks better of it, and edges away. After a slight pause, enter Alice and Ralph.*)

Ralph (*finishing something said in the hall outside*). It was just like my aunt, that was. I'm much obliged to her. (*To Emily*) Well, Emily, have you forgiven me?

Emily.

What for?

Ralph.

Stealing your sister.

Emily.

I don't know. But you needn't think I didn't know all about it, Mr Emery, because I did.

Ralph (*stooping and kissing her*).

Call me Ralph.

Emily.

Alice has been telling you.

Ralph.

No, she hasn't. Call me Ralph.

Emily.

Well, Ralph, then!

Ralph.

That's right. Now I've got something to say to Alice in private.

Emily.

Oh, you needn't hint—you needn't hint! I know what you've got to say to her. I'm going. I won't bother you. I shall do my lessons in the kitchen to-night.

(*Exit.*)

Ralph (*turning with sudden seriousness to Alice.*) I've got some very bad news.

Alice.

Bad news?

Ralph.

Yes. I suppose I'd better tell you at once. Old Mr Beach has committed suicide.

Alice (*dropping into a chair*).

Old Mr Beach! But how can that be? Willie Beach was here scarcely an hour ago.

Ralph.

Yes, I know. I was coming up here to find him, and I met him on the road. It was I who had the job of breaking it to him.

Alice.

Suicide! Why did he do it?

Ralph.

Oh, I suppose he had let things go too far and was overfaced.

Alice.

What things?

Ralph.

Business . . . Debts, in a word.

Alice.

It's terrible! How did he——

Ralph.

Hung himself from a rope in the office. I needn't give you the details.

Alice.

Yes, I want to know everything (*with an impatient movement*).

Ralph.

It's no good for you, my dear girl. (*Pause.*) From a nail in the ceiling. He got the rope from the packing-house—deliberately went down and fetched it. He was so heavy that the rope stretched a good deal, and when I found him his toes were actually touching the floor.

Alice.

Then were you the first to find him ?

Ralph.

Yes. I'd called in at Edward Street to see Will for a minute about the Sunday School prizes, and I went straight up to the office as usual, and knocked, and as there wasn't any answer and the door was ajar, I just peeped in. . . .

Alice.

You cut him down ?

Ralph.

Of course.

Alice.

He was dead then ?

Ralph.

Oh yes. No mistake about that. It seems that he had been talking quite cheerfully to the office-boy after Willie left to come up here. Then some letters were delivered by the afternoon post. It was after that that he killed himself. Perhaps something in one of the letters. . . .

Alice.

You didn't see the letters ?

Ralph.

No, I left everything exactly as it was, and sent instantly for the police and a doctor. Then I started off in search of Will.

Alice.

It's too terrible !

Ralph.

Yes, it's pretty bad.

Alice.

How he must have suffered !

Ralph.

Who ? Will ?

Alice.

Both of them ! Both of them !

Ralph.

Naturally Will was staggered. Couldn't believe it at first. I must say he behaved rather well—better than I should have expected. But he broke down completely when he saw the body. He was very much attached to his father.

Alice.

Yes, I've always felt that. (*Looking up ; with violence*) What a shame !

Ralph.

It is a shame (*reflectively*). He had no right to do it—a man in his position ! No *right* ! There's only one bright spot—and it's not much—in the whole affair, and that is that he'd resigned office in the Sunday School.

Alice.

I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of all they must have gone through, the old gentle-

man and Willie. There's no doubt he was driven to it. When I think that he did it while Willie was up here arguing with father and me (*weeps*).

Ralph.

My dear girl, try not to cry.

Alice (*passionately*).

There's no doubt that father and I have had a great deal to do with this. We're responsible. We've been fearfully hard.

Ralph.

Responsible for old Beach's death ! My dearest girl, what next ? (*taking her hand*). I assure you the idea is absurd. I undertake to say that they were stuck fast everywhere—everywhere. Hadn't a chance !

Alice (*ignoring this speech*).

Willie *said* they were at their wits' end, but father wouldn't listen. He said it was killing old Mr Beach. What did I tell you last night ? . . . It *has* killed him. At least we have.

Ralph.

My dear Alice, what can have given you such notions ? You wouldn't have them if you weren't so sensitive and highly strung.

Alice (*scornfully*).

Me highly strung ! . . . The works is mine, and it isn't worth the rent, and—and——

Ralph (*firmly*).

Now, Alice, calm yourself, I insist. If I had dreamt how it would have upset you, I wouldn't have told you so suddenly. Now do try to be calm.

Alice (*controlling herself*).

Nobody could make money on that works!

Ralph.

Then why didn't they leave it?

Alice.

They couldn't, because of the arrears of rent.

Ralph.

The fact is, they ought to have gone into bankruptcy years ago. Everybody has felt that.

Alice.

Mr Beach couldn't stand the disgrace.

Ralph.

And what about *this* disgrace? What about the disgrace he has now brought not only on himself and Willie, but the entire Wesleyan Society? (*Alice shows signs of breaking out again. He kisses her.*) Dearest girl, don't let's talk about it. You'll feel differently to-morrow.

Alice.

Very well (*concealing all her feelings*).

(*A pause, after which Ralph draws a case from his pocket, and takes from it a ring, which*

he places on her finger. She yields her hand limply.)

Alice (*listlessly*).

Thank you, Ralph. It's beautiful. (*They kiss.*)

(*Eli quietly enters through the kitchen. He is carrying a newspaper.*)

Eli.

So you're at it.

Ralph (*maintaining his dignity*).

Have you heard the news, Mr Boothroyd?

Eli.

Have I heard th' news? Who hasn't?

(*Enter Emily.*)

Emily.

What news?

Eli.

Get away to yer lessons, wench! (*Exit Emily: the kitchen door is shut on her.*) Ay! I've heard th' news (*opening the paper*). I ain't surprised. Suicide's i' that blood. Gad's uncle Elijah tried to kill himself twice afore he died o' gravel. They've got it in th' *Signal* as large as life. (*Reading from the newspaper*) "The motive for the rash act is not yet clear. . . . The deceased was a prominent Sunday School worker."

Ralph.

It's a severe and a very unmerited blow for the Wesleyan Society.

Eli.

Oh! don't let that trouble ye, young man. Th' Society'll pick itself up and dust its britches [breeches] and go on in a day or two as if nought had happened. (*To Alice*) We shall be forced for do something with Edward Street now. Th' estate'll go into bankruptcy. We shall have a preferential claim over th' other creditors for six months' rent, and what with that and what we got this afternoon we shan't be doing so badly.

Ralph.

You got something on account this afternoon?

Eli.

Ay!

Ralph.

I congratulate you.

Eli.

Alice, to-night ye must draw a cheque for thirty-six pounds ten shillings and give it me.

Alice.

Yes, father. What is it for?

Eli.

What is it for? It's half the cost of a dining-room suite as Mrs Copestick and me's giving ye for a wedding present. So her says. Young man, they tell me as ye're going to marry my daughter.

(*Curtain.*)

ACT III—SCENE 1

Same scene.
William Beach enters to Alice. He is in mourning.
Time : Four days later : night.

Willie (*as he sits down*).

Well, Miss Boothroyd, I've buried him. He's gone.

Alice (*after a pause, mechanically taking up the stocking which she has been mending*).

You must be relieved it's all over.

Willie.

Yes, in a way. Is your father in ?

Alice.

No, I'm all alone in the house. At least, Emily is in bed.

Willie.

I want to see him very particularly.

Alice.

I don't expect he'll be in before about ten o'clock.

Willie (*looking at the clock*).

That's nearly an hour. You don't know where I could find him ?

Alice.

He's down at Mr Emery's works. They're taking stock. I shouldn't be surprised if they came up here together.

Willie.

Oh! Well, I can't go down there after him. And I can't wait. And I don't think I can screw myself up to coming again. I've come to do it and do it I must. Miss Boothroyd, you remember that bill of exchange I gave you on the day the dad killed himself?

Alice.

Yes.

Willie.

It's forged.

Alice.

Forged! What do you mean?

Willie.

Catlings' name is forged on it. So I came up to tell your father; but you'll do as well. I feel as if I should like to tell you all about it. The fact is that Catlings had really given us a bill for thirty pounds; but we'd discounted it before we got that letter from you—your father, I should say—about distraining for the rent. The dad was very hopeful like, that morning. There were orders in, and a goodish sum due to us from Speaight's at Manchester in less than a fortnight. The dad was sure if we could only hold out till then, we should turn the corner. Your letter put him about dreadfully. It was then that he had the idea of using Catlings' name—just temporary like. He didn't think there'd be much chance of getting round your father. He sent me to the

post-office to buy a bill stamp, and then he wrote out the bill all but the signature. "You go up to Boothroyd's," he says to me, "and do your level best to gain time. I don't suppose you'll be able to," he says, "but try, try all you can." And I did. "*If* you don't succeed," he says, "then offer 'em this bill, and ask 'em to hold it, and we'll redeem it with part of Speaight's money, and that'll be all right. No harm done there, Will," he says. Then he tries Catlings' signature on the back of an envelope. "Here, Will," he says, "my old hand shakes. You have a go," and he gives me a letter of Catlings' to copy from. I did it easy enough after a try or two. "That'll be all right, Will," he says, and I put my hat on and brought the bill up here. That's the truth, Miss Boothroyd. Of course it was the smash of Speaights that finished off my old dad. I explained that at the inquest. The letter came immediately after I left him. That's all. (*He rises.*)

Alice (*rising*).

Whatever shall you do?

Willie.

There's nothing to be done. It was bound to be. It's our luck. We'd no thought but that we should bring you thirty pounds in cash, and get that bit o' paper back, and rip it up, and no one the worse. But we were always unlucky, me and him. If you'll just tell your father, and say I'm ready to go to the police station when he gives

the word. It's a bad business, but I'm ready for it.

Alice

But can't we do something ?

Willie.

Your father keeps the bill, I suppose—not you ?

Alice.

I could ask him to destroy it.

Willie.

He wouldn't. You'll excuse me saying so, but he wouldn't. No, there's nothing to be done (*turns away*).

Alice.

Listen ! There *is* something to be done ! There must be ! I'll do anything to help you, anything ! Why, if you went to prison for *that*, I should be ready to kill myself ! I'll arrange *something*.

Willie.

But what ?

Alice.

I don't know, yet. But it's my property, the works is, and it's my bill, and I'm twenty-five (*listening*).

Willie.

What's that ?

Alice.

It's father and Mr Emery.

Willie.

Already ! (*half-heartedly*). You'd better let me see your father and tell him.

Alice (*in a whisper*).

Hush ! No ! You must count on me. I'll come and see you at the works to-morrow afternoon (*pushing him towards the kitchen door*).

Willie.

I've done at the works. They've turned me out of the works. The Official Receiver's in charge there. If I wasn't going to prison I should emigrate.

Alice.

Well, shall you be at home ?

Willie.

Yes.

Alice.

I'll come there, then. This way. I don't want father to see you.

Willie.

Don't you quarrel with your father on my account, Miss Boothroyd.

Alice.

Come ! Quick !

(*Exeunt Willie and Alice by the kitchen. Enter Ralph, L. He looks about. Re-enter Alice.*)

Alice (*smiling*).

Oh! So there you are! You've finished earlier than you expected, haven't you?

Ralph.

Yes, your father is very great at figures (*kissing her*). Very great! Were you alone?

Alice.

Yes. Where is father?

Ralph.

I don't know. Somewhere in the house. It's an astonishing thing, but I believe it has dawned on the old gentleman that we ought, in common decency, to be left by ourselves now and then. So I expect he's leaving us by ourselves. I can't stay.

Alice.

Can't you? Is the stocktaking satisfactory?

Ralph.

I should just say it was. I don't want to boast. But wait—wait till we're married and I've got that new capital of yours. And you'll see! I shall surprise even your father! By the way, I've said nothing to him yet about your fortune. Would you like me to?

Alice.

Just as you think best. Everything will be in your hands.

Ralph.

Well, that's what I was thinking. Better to say nothing unless he does. Of course, if he suggests a formal marriage-settlement, I shall be the last person in the world to say No. But if he doesn't . . . Let sleeping dogs lie. That's what I say. We shall be freer without a settlement. My dear, we're going to cut a figure in the world.

Alice.

Are we ?

Ralph.

I shall be mayor of this town before you can say Jack Robinson.

Alice.

I hope I shan't have to be mayoress.

Ralph (*caressing her*).

Now, don't talk like that. You'll make a perfect mayoress. (*Alice smiles and shakes her head.*) Next month I shall certainly have to engage an extra clerk. At the present time I'm wasting two hours a day in clerk's work that a youth at a pound a week could do.

Alice (*suddenly*).

Why don't you take on Willie Beach ?

Ralph.

Willie Beach ! No fear. In the first place, I never have anything to do with failures. And, in the second place, he's no good. He was never

made for a business man. A decent sort of an ass, but incompetent to the last degree—at least, I should judge so. What made you think of Willie ?

Alice (*containing herself*).

It was just an idea that came into my head. I understood he had nothing to do.

Ralph.

He hasn't. But there's some talk of him emigrating to Canada or somewhere. I'd gladly help him with his passage money. As a matter of fact, he'd be safer away.

Alice.

Safer ? (*almost ironically*).

Ralph.

I may as well tell you, my dear girl, though it will worry you, I'm sure. But I don't want to have *any* secrets from you, and it's always best to begin as you mean to go on.

Alice.

What ?

Ralph.

You know old Beach was treasurer of the Chapel Building Fund. I was asked to take his place. Well, I've discovered there's a sum of fifty pounds missing.

Alice (*moved*).

Missing ? What do you mean ?

Ralph.

I mean misappropriated. I mean stolen. It's simply scandalous. It's the most shameful thing that has ever happened in the Wesleyan Society.

Alice.

Are you sure ?

Ralph.

I am . . . It mustn't get about. I've spoken to no one yet.

Alice.

No indeed ! What a dreadful thing for Willie Beach if it did !

Ralph.

I wasn't thinking of Willie Beach. Perhaps it will be no surprise to him. Probably he's expecting the scandal to burst any day.

Alice.

But who could have told him ?

Ralph.

I daresay he had a hand in it.

Alice (*warmly*).

That I'm sure he never did !

Ralph (*coldly*).

Why are you sure ? Like father, like son !

Alice.

Don't be so hard (*appealingly and yet coldly*).

Ralph.

I'm not hard. I'm only looking probabilities in the face. A week ago, who would have suspected old Gad of such things? Yet there it is. Father and son were as thick as thieves (*laughs drily*).

Alice (*still coldly*).

Anyhow, it will be kept secret, I hope.

Ralph.

Yes, certainly. The Society has already suffered enough by the suicide.

Alice.

Can't the money simply be repaid? I should like to pay it.

Ralph.

I was thinking of paying it myself. But if you would like to do so, very well.

Alice.

You put it right, and I will repay you the money. And then not a soul will know.

Ralph.

All right. We'll keep it as quiet as we can. But it can't be kept altogether a secret.

Alice.

Why not?

Ralph (*firmly*).

Because it's my duty to tell the superintendent minister.

Alice.

Mr Pratt? And suppose he tells Mrs Pratt? You know what Mrs Pratt is.

Ralph.

I can't help that. The superintendent must certainly know. And probably the stewards. Besides, I can't doctor the accounts. The auditors would detect that in a minute.

Alice.

I should have thought it would have been the easiest thing in the world to put back the money without breathing a syllable to a soul.

Ralph (*somewhat annoyed by her tone*).

That's where you're mistaken, my dear. You may rely upon it, that, for the reputation of the Society, not an unnecessary word will be said.

Alice.

When would you like me to give the money?

Ralph (*curtly*).

Oh, any time.

(*A rather chilly silence*).

Ralph (*with an effort to be cheerful and amiable, and to disperse this slight cloud*).

By the way, talking of Beach's, their house is for sale. I needn't say that it's mortgaged. It's going cheap. Your father thinks it's a good spec. Either you or he might buy it. Of course, it's small.

Alice (*with surprise*).

Small, do you say ?

Ralph.

Small for the sort of thing we shall want, I mean. But we could enlarge it—build a drawing-room. That's between you and me. If your father heard that I had spoken of enlarging, he would think I'd gone mad. And I don't want him to think that—before we're married, anyhow ! I only mention the house to you now as a notion. I know you ladies begin getting your house-linen together very early in the proceedings, and it may be useful for you to bear in mind possibilities. That's all.

Alice.

And what will Willie Beach do, and old Miranda ?

Ralph.

Well, it's a certainty they can't stop where they are.

Alice.

If we took the house, it would seem like driving them out.

Ralph (*overcome for the moment by this feminine absurdity*).

Alice ! Whatever will you say next ?

(*Another chilly silence*).

Ralph (*kindly once more*).

Well, I must be off. I didn't mean to stay

more than a moment. I'll call at Mr Pratt's on my way down. I may catch him in. Emily gone to bed?

Alice.

Yes.

Ralph.

Let me see. Saturday to-morrow. Let's go for a walk in the afternoon, eh?

Alice.

I can't go in the afternoon.

Ralph.

Why not?

Alice.

I've got so much to do—er—in the house.

Ralph.

Ah! We'll alter that when we're married. Can I come for tea?

Alice.

Oh do!

Ralph.

Five o'clock, eh?

Alice.

Yes.

Ralph.

Well, good-night, my dear girl (*kissing her fondly*). And there's one for Emily. Don't forget to give it to her. No, I shan't say good

night to the old gentleman. I can let myself out.

(*He goes away quietly, Alice watching him from the door. Alice then goes to her father's desk, opens it, searches for the forged bill of exchange, finds it and takes it out.*)

Alice (*examining the bill*).

"Accepted—Catlings." So that's what he'd have to go to prison for!

(*She puts the bill in the fire, then closes the desk, and sits down quickly.*)

(*Enter Eli.*)

Alice.

Father, I must have some money. While I'm drawing that cheque for you, I'll write one for myself.

Eli (*suspiciously*).

What's afoot now?

Alice.

I shall have to buy things—for my marriage—

Eli.

Oh, and when are ye for marrying? We'll begin to talk about that next year.

Alice.

I must have some clothes.

Eli.

Art naked?

Alice.

And then there will be all the house-linen to buy.

Eli.

What house-linen ?

Alice.

For our house—Ralph's and mine. I can't begin too soon. And I have other things that I shall need money for.

Eli.

It's not your place to buy th' house-linen.

Alice.

Yes, it is ; Ralph gave me a hint of it to-night.

Eli.

Oh ! Did he ? Well done, Rafe ! I say it isn't your place to buy th' house-linen, and let that suffice. Get to bed !

Alice.

Father, I must have a hundred pounds. I really must. I mean it.

Eli (*furious*).

Thou means it ? What dost mean ?

Alice.

I mean I must have a hundred pounds.

Eli.

I'd advise ye to take care o' thy tongue, lass. *Thou means it !*

Alice.

You needn't give it me all at once. But fifty pounds I must have at once.

Eli (*relapsing more and more into the dialect as he gets angrier*).

It's not thy place to buy th' house-linen, and I shanna' give it thee!

Alice.

I'm not asking you to give it me, father. I'm only asking for my own money. Why do you want to make me miserable?

Eli.

I wish to God thou'dst never set eyes on Rafe Emery, nor him on thee! It's given thee pride, and made thee undutiful.

Alice.

I'm only asking you for my own. (*A silence.*)

Eli.

I shanna' give it thee.

Alice (*facing him*).

But you must. It's mine.

(*A pause. Then Eli rushes madly to the desk, and drags out of it several books, which he flings down one by one on the table.*)

Eli.

Here! Take thy traps. Cheque-book, paying-in-book, pass-book. Take 'em. I wash my hands

o' thee. Chuck thy money in th' canal, if thou'st a mind. I've done wi' thee. Ne'er speak to me again, for I'll never speak to thee. Get to bed!

Alice (*gathering up the books*).

Thank you, father. I'm sorry I——

Eli (*bawling*).

Get to bed!

(*Alice goes to door, L., and then turns.*)

Alice.

I think I ought to tell you that Willie Beach has been up here to-night.

Eli.

When?

Alice.

Just before you and Ralph came in.

Eli.

I heard ye tell Rafe as ye'd been all alone.

Alice.

Yes, but I hadn't.

Eli.

Art carrying on wi' Will Beach behind Rafe's back, then? Thou hadst always a sneaking fancy for him. And thou hast the face to tell me! What is it? What's he gallivanting round here for?

Alice.

He came up to see you. But you weren't in. So he saw me. He told me that that bill of exchange, as you call it, that blue paper for thirty pounds, was forged. He said he had forged Catlings' name on it. (*She stops.*)

Eli (*hoarsely*).

Get on wi' thy tale.

Alice.

He said he was ready to go to prison as soon as you gave the word. But I told him : "No such thing." I said it must be settled quietly. I said he could leave it to me. He was driven to do it by us, and I thought the least we could do was——

Eli.

Dost mean to say as that blasted scoundrel came here and told thee he'd forged a bill, and thou told him to leave it to thee to settle ? Dost mean to——(*He breaks off and strides to the desk.*)

Alice (*crying out in terror*).

It isn't there ! It isn't there !

Eli (*fumbling in his desk*).

What isna' here ?

Alice.

The paper. I've just burnt it. (*Eli is staggered.*) It was mine, really, and I thought——

Eli (*recovering himself with a supreme effort*).

Thou thought! Shame on thee, Alice Boothroyd! (*Shouting*) Shame on thee for a shameless hussy! A daughter o' mine, and just promised to another man! Thou'rt an accomplice i' forgery. Thou sees the scamp on the sly. Thou —thou—— (*In a different voice*) Shalt speak o' this to Rafe Emery?

Alice.

I will tell him if you like.

Eli (*menacingly*).

Look thee here! If thou breathes a word o' thy shame to Rafe Emery, I'll cut thy tongue out. A daughter o' mine!

Alice.

I will not, father.

Eli.

And understand! (*shouting*) Ne'er speak to me again!

(*Alice, now weeping, opens the door. Emily is standing there in her nightdress, listening.*)

Emily (*terror-struck*).

Oh, Alice! whatever is the matter?

Alice.

Come along to bed, dear.

(*Curtain.*)

SCENE 2

Living-room at the Priory. A quaint, poverty-stricken, but clean room in a Georgian house, with a door, R., leading out of the house, and a door at the back leading to the kitchen.

Miranda Finney is reposing in an old rocking-chair. She is the only untidy object in the room, and is wearing a very coarse apron.

Time: The next afternoon.

Miranda (*listening to a knock at the door*).

Come in, then; come in! If it's the butcher, this is a nice time o' day. And Saturday, too. I can't get up from my chair no more.

(*Enter Alice, R.*)

Miranda.

Eh? Who is it? That's never you, Miss Boothroyd? (*Tries to rise, and sinks back.*) You're just too late, miss.

Alice.

Don't get up, Miss Finney. (*Shaking hands*) How are you? Too late? Isn't Mr Willie in, then?

Miranda.

Oh, Mr Willie! He'll be in soon. I thought you'd come after Mr Emery.

Alice.

Mr Emery?

Miranda.

He has but just left.

Alice (*startled*).

Mr Emery been here—this afternoon ?

Miranda.

Ay, with Mr Holdcroft, th' architect. Appears Mr Emery is thinking o' buying the place. So I thought as happen you meant to meet him here.

Alice (*weakly*).

Oh, no !

Miranda.

Seemingly Mr Emery thinks o' enlarging it, as if it wasn't too large already ! Eh, miss, I've known this house ever since it came to Mr Beach from his wife's uncle ; and if anybody knows it's a barracks, it's me. Used to be called the Priory, eight-and-twenty years ago. But Mr Beach dropped that name, us being Nonconformists. I did hear Mr Emery say as if he bought it he should call it th' Priory again. Eh, well ! So you didn't come to meet Mr Emery ?

Alice.

No, it's Mr Willie that my business is with. And how are you, Miss Finney ?

Miranda.

As ye see me. Bad ! bad ! I'm done for. It's the rheumatism as takes me ; and my heart ! But none can say as th' house isn't clean. I work

till I drop. God be thanked, I'd finished Saturday cleaning the very minute afore Mr Emery came. I hadn't time to change my apron, and walking upstairs with him brought my heart on, and now I can't change it. But th' house is clean.

Alice.

It's beautiful.

Miranda.

Ay ; he noticed it. "Pity you never married, Miss Finney," says he ; "you'd have made a rare good wife." You know his way o' talking. "Me marry!" I says ; "what would *they* ha' done without me? Eight-and-twenty years I've looked after 'em, hand and foot! and twenty-six years since Mrs Beach died! I've seen 'em through bad times and good, mainly bad, and getting worse. I've stuck by 'em. *He'd* say that, if he were alive. No, I'm none for marriage, and I never was," I says. "I'd be ashamed," I says, "to be some o' them spinsters down to th' chapel, always hanging round th' chapel yard on th' off-chance of a service, o' purpose to catch that there young Mr Sargent, th' new minister, and all because he's got hair as curls like a baby's. It's a sign of a hard winter, Mr Emery," I says, says I, "when the 'ay runs after the 'orse." Eh, and how he laughed, miss! And it's not often as Mr Emery laughs, to make much of a noise as you might say. And so ye're going to marry him?

Alice (*brightly*).

Yes, I suppose so.

Miranda.

Well, there's been a lot o' talk about it, that there has! I'm thinking there's many a young man as would ha' liked to hang up his hat on *your* father's hatstand. But ye've chosen well, that I do say. And I hope ye'll be happy. I'm not the marrying sort myself.

Alice (*smiling*).

This is the sitting-room, I suppose? I've never been here before.

Miranda.

I know ye haven't. Yes, this is th' sitting-room. Mr Emery and th' architect man were talking about knocking a hole in that there wall (*pointing R.*), and building out a drawing-room on that bit o' ground as we calls th' orchard.

Alice.

Really! Did Mr Emery see Mr Willie?

Miranda.

No.

Alice.

I suppose he won't be coming back again?

Miranda.

Who! Your young man? No, and so you needn't expect it. But Mr Willie'll be in in a minute or two. Poor lad! (*In a lower voice*)

I reckon it's all over here, miss. They've chucked him out o' th' works. I *have* heard Canada mentioned, but not by Mr Willie; Mr Willie's scarce said a word, since *he* hung himself. Scarce a word. I do praise heaven for one thing, and that is as *he* did it at th' works and not here. It 'ud ha' killed me if he'd done it here. I should ha' gone right off.

Alice (*at a loss what to say*).

But supposing Mr Willie goes to Canada, Miss Finney, what shall you do?

Miranda.

Me? I'm not long for this world.

Alice.

Don't say that.

Miranda.

Yes, eight-and-twenty years I've been with 'em. But not as a servant. No, I never was considered as a servant. I've always had my meals with the family, and everybody outside has always said "Miss" to me. And now my old bones is done for. I've fought the fight. I've kept the faith! Praise be to Almighty God, there's a mansion up there for me at last. And not sorry shall I be when I'm called—after *this*! (*Seems to doze.*)

Alice.

Can I do anything for you, get you anything?

Miranda (*opening her eyes*).

There's seventeen pounds, six shillings in my box upstairs. That'll pay for my funeral, and Master Willie'll have what's over. I've writ my own will. There'd ha' been more for th' lad, but *he* never paid me no wages this four years past. (*Pause.*) Not a word o' that to Master Willie! He doesn't know half what *he* used to do. (*Dozes.*)

Alice.

Oh, of course not. (*Pause.*) Now, can't I——

Miranda (*suddenly starting up*).

But don't think as it's because I haven't had chances.

Alice.

Chances?

Miranda.

O' marrying. I've had heaps. But I'm not the marrying sort. (*Sleeps.*)

Alice (*uncertain what to do, walks about*).

Do you think Mr Willie will be long? (*No reply. Pause.*)

(*Enter Willie, very quietly*).

Willie (*extremely excited at seeing Alice, but controlling himself as much as possible*).

So—so you've come as you promised!

Alice.

Hsh! (*pointing to Miranda*). She's asleep.

Willie.

She often sleeps for hours. (*Looking at Alice anxiously*) So you've come! (*They both draw away from Miranda.*)

Alice (*with a glow of pleasure, but moderating her voice*).

It's all right. You needn't worry any more. It's all right.

Willie.

Wh—what do you mean?

Alice.

Why! I got that paper and burnt it.

Willie.

Does your father know?

Alice.

He knows. But he won't do anything. It's all right. I've arranged it. The paper's burnt and everything is settled.

(*Willie drops into a chair, buries his head in his arms on the table and sobs.*)

Alice.

What is it? What's the matter? You'll wake Miranda!

(*After a pause Willie raises his head, ana, quietening his sobs a little, looks at her without speaking. She avoids his glance.*)

Willie (*his body still shaken by intermittent sobs*).

I was only thinking—what an angel you are!

Alice.

Oh! Mr Willie, it was the least I could do.

Willie (*passionately*).

You don't know what an angel you are! You don't know what I think of you! You don't know what you've done! You've saved me—and now I want to thank you, and I can't.

Alice.

Hsh! I don't *want* you to thank me. I should hate you to thank me. You are free—that's all. Don't cry any more. What are you going to do?

Willie.

Miss Boothroyd, I'm glad it was me and not father that forged that note. Now there's no blot on him. The old dad was always as straight as they make 'em. All his accounts, for chapel and everything, always in order! Never a penny out!

Alice.

Yes. Everyone knows that.

Willie.

And see how he kept Miranda on (*lowering his voice*). It's many and many a year since she was worth the wages he paid her.

Alice.

The house seems very clean, though.

Willie.

Yes, but the life she has led us, with her cleaning!

Alice.

Are you going to Canada?

Willie.

I thought I was going to prison. I didn't dare to hope . . .

Alice.

But you *are* going to Canada?

Willie.

The creditors offered to allow me twenty pounds so that I could go.

Alice.

What did you say to that?

Willie.

I didn't say anything. I thought I should be going to prison. I didn't——

Alice.

Don't you think it would be a good thing for you to go away—to Canada or somewhere?

Willie.

There's no room for me in the Five Towns, that's a certainty.

Alice.

It isn't that there isn't room for you. But you would feel happier in Canada, more free. And

then one day you would come back. If I were in your place, I should go—at once.

Willie.

Yes. But what about Miranda? I can't leave her. She'd starve.

Alice.

I would see she was looked after.

Willie.

How could you look after her?

Alice.

I *would*. When I promise a thing you may count on it.

Willie (*with renewed emotion*).

I know—I know.

Alice.

Will you go . . . ? Tell me, yes or no.

Willie.

Yes.

Alice.

That's all right. Now I must be getting home.

Willie.

Must you?

Alice.

Yes. Or I shall be late for tea. (*With an effort*) Mr Emery is coming.

Willie.

You knew he'd been here?

Alice.

Yes. Miranda told me.

Willie.

So he's thinking of buying this house. . . . It was because of him that I was out when you came in. I saw him coming up the road from the bedroom window. So I went out till he'd gone. I couldn't face meeting him. But now I'm glad he's buying the house.

Alice.

Are you? Why?

Willie.

I shall always think of you in it.

Alice.

And I shall always think of you in Canada, getting on, doing well. (*Giving him her hand which he takes limply*) I shall always think of you. You've had a hard time. But you'll soon have some splendid luck, I hope.

Willie.

I've had it! I've had it! I've had an angel's visit. You don't know what you are to me. I didn't know myself till——(*Hides his head again.*)

Alice.

Good-bye, Mr Willie. (*He makes no answer.*) Good-bye! When do you think you shall go?

Willie (*without raising his head*).

I don't know. . . Soon.

Alice.

Well, if I don't see you again . . . (*Exit silently. But in opening the door she disturbs Miranda.*)

(*Willie remains a long time with his face hidden. Then he looks round.*)

Miranda (*waking up*).

That you, Mister Willie ?

Willie.

Yes.

Miranda.

Miss Boothroyd here ?

Willie.

No.

Miranda.

She came up after Mr Emery. She would have it as she didn't know he'd been here. But you mustn't tell *me*. I know what girls *are*.

(*Curtain.*)

ACT IV

Scene: The same room as in the previous scene, but transformed by wealth into something very agreeable, without any loss of quaintness. There are now large double-doors, L., which lead to a vast new drawing-room.

Time: An afternoon six years later. Except Mrs Copestick, everyone looks older. Alice is more mature, Emily quite grown up. Eli is senile—he has had a slight stroke. Ralph has a little grey in his hair. Willie has become stout.

Alice, Mrs Copestick, and Emily are talking together. All are dressed with great splendour, but Alice wears a white apron. Mrs Copestick has a new bonnet, and Emily something very special in hats.

Emily.

My dear Alice, I should have thought you had servants enough!

Alice (*who is taking off her apron*).

My dear Emily, it's not the slightest use you trying to cure me. There are certain things which I feel I must do myself, even if I had forty servants. I'm like that. Ralph used to worry over it, but he doesn't now.

Emily.

Has his worship come in yet?

Alice.

He'll be up soon. It's only three o'clock. At the earliest no one will *think* of arriving before four or half-past.

Mrs Copestick.

Of course, Alice, *I* only came early because you specially asked me to.

Alice.

My dear auntie, I'm very much obliged to you for coming; I just wanted you to cast an eye over things.

Mrs Copestick (*laughing*).

What an idea! You're a ten times better manager than I ever was. I'm sure everything is simply perfect.

Emily.

Seen the *Signal* to-day?

Mrs Copestick.

No. What is there in it?

Emily.

Oh nothing! Only a little paragraph about the Mayoress of Bursley's reception (*with an air at once ironic and "grand"*), and about it being an innovation not to hold it in the Town Hall, but that the recent alterations and enlargements at the Mayor's well-known residence, "The Priory," make it extremely suitable—and so on. You know the style of thing.

Alice.

Well, all I can say is, I wish it was over. Anybody that wants my place can have it. Still, I've been through some tight places since November, and I suppose I can get through another. The worst of it is, I shan't know a bit what to say to the people.

Mrs Copestick.

Don't bother about that. It'll come to you.

Alice.

Oh, will it?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. You were simply splendid at the dinner to the aged poor.

Alice.

Ah, but that wasn't the same thing.

Mrs Copestick.

All you have to do is to take it easy. Don't begin by going off like a rocket. Just smile and shake hands with each one.

Emily (*imitating*).

And say how *glad* you are to see them. Wouldn't *I* like to be mayoress!

Mrs Copestick.

Well, perhaps you will be, one day. Then we shall see and wonder.

Emily.

Never in this world! Who ever heard of two sisters both being mayoresses? Besides——

Mrs Copestick.

Besides what?

Emily.

Oh, nothing. Father was very annoying to-day.

Alice.

How?

Emily.

Usual things. And he wouldn't take his hypophosphite.

Alice.

What did you do?

Emily.

I made him, of course.

Alice.

Did he want to come up here with you?

Emily.

I don't know. I told him he wasn't to stir out of the garden. I *was* in a state, what with one thing and another. My hat didn't come from Brunt's till half-past one. And then just as I was leaving, Dinah began——

Mrs Copestick.

What? Another fresh servant?

Emily (*nods*).

"Please, miss, th' mester's been trying to borrow money off me, miss" (*sighs*) . . . . Oh dear! Half-past four, do you say? I say, Alice, let's

have some tea now. I can't hold out till half-past four.

Alice.

But, my dear child, every cup and saucer we have is spread out there (*indicating the new drawing-room*), and I'm not going to have them disarranged.

Emily.

Including that cup father cracked the other day ?

Alice.

Oh no. I'm not using *that* one.

Emily.

Well, let's have it, then.

Mrs Copestick.

And what about poor us ?

Emily.

All drink out of the same cup, of course.

Alice.

What schemes she has ! Ring, then.

Emily.

No, I'll go into the kitchen myself. Even you couldn't tell a servant in cold blood to bring in one cracked cup for three people. (*Exit.*)

Mrs Copestick.

My word ! How that child has grown up !

Alice.

It's a very good thing she has, seeing how father has to be looked after. There's Ralph coming through the garden, now. And father with him! Good heavens! (*Going to door, R., and opening it.*)

(*Enter Ralph and Eli.*)

Ralph (*hastily kissing Alice*).

I found the old man wandering up here all alone. Where's Emily?

Alice.

She's here. Father, what do you want? (*She and Ralph talk apart.*)

Eli (*to Mrs Copestick*).

Well, old lady, I'm sorry to see you with my daughter Alice. No friend o' mine should be a friend o' hers.

Mrs Copestick.

Nonsense! Why, you were coming to see her yourself.

Eli.

I wasna'. I came after Emily. Emily's th' only one as I can trust. And her's turning against me. Alice—I havena' spoken to Alice for six year. Haven't I told ye her's an undutiful daughter?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes. You've told me a hundred times. You've told everyone. You're a very silly old man. (*They talk apart.*)

Ralph (*calmly*).

Well, then, if he won't have a male attendant, he ought to be put into a private asylum. Certainly he must be looked after better than this.

Alice.

Ralph! How can you? An asylum!

Ralph (*firmly, but very kindly*).

I say an asylum. What are asylums for? You forget how bad all this must be for Emily.

Alice.

Of course there's that to be thought of. But the poor old thing——

Ralph (*changing the subject*).

Well, I must go and change. Everything all right, I suppose? What shall you do with your father?

Alice.

I don't know. I must ask Emily. She'll be in in a moment.

Ralph (*as he passes Mrs Copestick*).

I see you're blooming, aunt. I'll be with you soon. (*Exit.*)

Eli.

Then you won't lend it me?

Mrs Copestick.

I assure you, I haven't got my purse here.

Eli.

Not threepence?

Mrs Copestick.

No, not threepence.

(*Enter Emily with a tray.*)

Emily (*banging the tray down*).

Father! How naughty you are! Really, you are too provoking! It's come to this—that I can't stir out without him following me! (*Approaching him*) I shall have to take you home, now. Alice, can I have the motor? It'll be the quickest way of getting him home.

Alice.

Yes. (*Rings bell.*)

Emily (*to Eli*).

Sit down, please, on that chair. Do!

Eli (*reluctantly and gloomily preparing to obey*).

I tell you what I shall do. I shall leave all my—— (*Stops on seeing servant enter.*)

Alice.

Bessie, tell Barratt to bring round the small car for Miss Emily and father.

Emily.

At once. (*Exit servant.*)

Eli (*resuming*).

I tell you what I shall do. I shall leave all my money to the North Staffordshire Hospital. Every penny of it.

Mrs Copestick.

You just told me you hadn't a penny.

Eli.

As I could get at, I said.

Emily.

Father ! (*Feels in his pocket and draws out a large handful of sixpences.*) Look there ! I gave him all those to quieten him this morning. Now please sit down. (*He obeys.*)

Alice.

Father, as you're here, will you have some tea ?

Eli.

Mrs Copestick, will ye kindly tell my daughter as I'd die afore I tasted her tea ?

Mrs Copestick.

I think you're getting very rude in your old age.

Emily.

Never mind him. I'll take him home in a minute. (*Going to the tray*) Tea ! Now, auntie, will you have first go at the cup ?

Mrs Copestick.

No, dear, you begin, as you're in a hurry. (*Eli sits silent and upright.*)

(*A bell is heard. All start except Eli. Emily hides Alice's apron.*)

Alice.

Goodness gracious! They can't have begun to come yet, surely.

Emily (*going to door, L., and peeping through*).

Well, if it isn't Willie Beach, (*whispering*) as stout as I don't know what! Well, what next? There's a lady, too.

Alice (*weakly*).

Willie Beach!

Mrs Copestick.

I heard this morning he was in the town. It seems he's married—a young lady with a lot of money.

Emily.

Oh! The lady's with him, is she? Yes, so she is. My, what a swell! (*Shutting door*) Bessie's bringing them in here. Well, no use making a fuss with Willie Beach, anyhow. But what does he mean by coming at this time, especially as he hasn't been invited?

(*Enter Bessie, followed by Willie and Edna, gorgeously dressed.*)

Bessie.

Mr and Mrs Beach.

Willie (*with a slight American accent*).

Well, Mrs Emery, as I suppose I must call you now, how are you? Back again in the old

town, you see. This is my wife (*with a gesture of rather fatuous pride*).

Alice.

How are you? Well, this is a surprise! (*Shakes hands with both of them and then finds nothing else to say.*)

Edna.

Glad to meet you, Mrs Emery. My husband has often talked about you.

Alice.

Has he?

Willie.

Mrs Copestick, and you, Miss Boothroyd! (*they shake hands*). Aren't you startled to see me come back like this?

Emily.

How do you do, Mr Beach?

Mrs Copestick.

You must give us time to be startled. We haven't wakened up to it yet. But we shall do our best. (*Edna shakes hands with the other women.*)

Willie (*smiling at a joke which he does not comprehend*).

And you, Mr Boothroyd? (*Eli shakes hands in stiff silence.*)

Alice.

My father, Mrs Beach.

Edna.

Glad to meet you, Mr Boothroyd. (*Eli shakes hands in stiff silence.*)

(*A pause.*)

Mrs Copestick.

And so you couldn't keep away from old Bursley, William? I'm gradually beginning to feel startled. But you know we take a lot of waking up here.

Willie (*with another vague laugh*).

You see, it's like this. My wife's got a lot of money, and I'm going to set up a pottery agency in Montreal, in a large way of business. So I've come over to interview a few of our leading manufacturers. I shall be able to pay spot cash for everything. What do you think of the scheme, as a scheme, Mr Boothroyd?

Eli (*beckoning*).

Come here, William Beach.

Edna.

What a quaint, darling old house! And did you really live here, darling?

Willie.

Now, Eddy, you're at it again. My wife finds everything quaint.

Edna.

Of course I do, darling. It's enough to beat the cars.

Mrs Copestick.

Surely you don't think *Bursley's* quaint, do you, Mrs Beach ?

Edna.

Oh ! It's just lovely ! All those little red houses !

Mrs Copestick.

Well, I never heard of such a thing ! Now I really am startled. We all think it's so dirty.

Edna.

Dirty ! You should go to Pittsburg. Bursley's like the day after washing-day compared to Pittsburg.

Willie (*who was crossing the room to Eli, but has stopped to listen to his wife*).

My wife's from Pittsburg.

Edna (*proudly*).

Yes, I'm a Pittsburg girl.

Mrs Copestick.

Really ! And have you been in England long ?

Edna.

Long ! I guess we haven't. Yesterday morning we landed. And I said to my husband we must just go right away to the Five Towns—right away.

Willie.

We came over in the *Minnetonka*. Splendid boat. We had a suite on the promenade deck. My word, they *do* charge for those suites.

Edna.

Now, darling, what does it matter so long as you're comfortable ?

Willie.

Listen to her.

Eli (*sternly*).

William Beach, come here.

Willie (*with a touch of his old humility*).

Coming, Mr Boothroyd.

Eli.

Can ye lend me some money ?

Emily.

Father !

Willie (*laughing loudly*).

Ha ! Good joke. Hear that, Eddy ? This is the richest man in the Five Towns ! How much, Mr Boothroyd, how much ?

Eli.

A shilling. I've nought about me. (*He rises.*)

Emily.

Please don't take any notice, Mr Beach.

Willie (*not perceiving the situation*).

Oh, but I must. Here you are, Mr Boothroyd. (*Offers a shilling.*)

Emily (*stepping between them*).

Please don't. Father, sit down. (*Eli obeys.*)

Alice.

Father is not very well ; hasn't been for some time.

Willie (*understanding ; touching his forehead*).

Dotty ! Well, I'm really sorry. But he must be getting on in years. By the way (*lowering his voice*), I shall rely on you not to let on to my wife about—that bill—will you ?

Alice (*affronted*).

How can you suggest such a thing !

Willie.

Well, I only just mentioned it, to be on the safe side. Isn't she splendid ? (*indicating his wife, who is in conversation with Mrs Copestick*).

Alice.

Oh yes. I'm sure she is !

Willie.

They tell me old Miranda is dead.

Alice.

Yes.

Willie.

Poor old thing!

Alice.

She wrote her own will, and left all her money to you, but the will wasn't witnessed, and so the money went to a cousin of hers at Rat Edge.

Willie.

You don't say! How much?

Alice.

About seventeen pounds.

Willie (*smiling indulgently*).

She meant well. And where's Mr Emery? At the works, I suppose.

Alice.

No, he's upstairs. He'll be down soon.

Willie (*reflectively*).

Mayor! Well, he said he should be mayor one day, and he is.

(*Enter Bessie.*)

Bessie.

The car is at the door, Miss Boothroyd. (*Exit.*)

Emily.

Thank you. Now, father! (*Eli does not stir.*)

Willie.

Mayor! Motor-car! He's going it. But, of course—I expect, what with one thing or another, you're richer even than we are.

Edna (*to Mrs Copestick*).

No, not at all. I don't want him to work. But he's such a darling when he works that I haven't the heart to stop him (*rising and looking about*).

Mrs Copestick.

And you're staying at the Tiger ?

Edna.

Yes. I guess I tore up the Tiger this morning when I asked for pop-corn. Mrs Emery, I hope you'll forgive me for staring, but it's so picturesque !

Willie.

Not so picturesque as it used to be, is it, Mrs Emery ?

Edna.

You don't say !

Willie (*to Alice.*)

You've made a lot of alterations. We came through the new drawing-room. Any other new rooms ?

Alice.

Oh yes, several.

Willie.

I suppose you wouldn't care to show my wife over the house ? It's a fancy of hers, and——

Alice.

Certainly. Emily, will you take Mrs Beach—— (*To Willie*) I'm——

Emily (*coldly*).

I must really take father home.

Mrs Copestick.

I will show Mrs Beach over the house, if you like, Alice.

Alice.

Yes do, auntie.

Edna.

That *is* good of you! How quaint! It's enough to beat the cars.

Willie.

I'll come too. Where shall we start, Mrs Copestick?

Mrs Copestick.

Suppose we go this way by the new drawing-room.

(*Exeunt L., Mrs Copestick, Willie, and Edna. They are heard talking.*)

Emily.

How *awful* Willie Beach has grown! And her! Did you notice how she looked at this teacup? (*Imitating*) "It's enough to beat the cars." What does that mean?

Alice.

I don't know.

Emily.

Come along, father. Well, I hope they'll be gone before I get back. Now, father. (*Eli rises in silence, obediently. Exeunt Emily and Eli, R.*)

(*Enter Edna.*)

Edna (*hurriedly*).

Oh, Mrs Emery, can I sit down and have a little chat ?

Alice.

Please do. I'm so glad Mr Beach has brought you up here to see us.

Edna.

Oh ! I insisted on it. When I first knew him, Willie used to talk quite a lot about Bursley and you.

Alice.

Yes ?

Edna.

Yes. And you know how women feel about these things ? We do, don't we ? Well, I felt you must have been very, very kind to him ; very *sympathetic.*

Alice.

No, no. Really, I never knew Mr Beach intimately at all.

Edna (*with an incredulous smile*).

Is that so ? Well, now, I didn't either, till we were married. I met him in Winnipeg when I was travelling with father and mother. It came over me as soon as I saw him. "Father," I said, "mother," I said, "I'm just going to marry that young man right off." And I did. They always let me do what I like. I'm all they have, you know. . . . Aren't they just speaking eyes ?

Alice.

Whose ?

Edna.

Willie's. What seemed to me so remarkable (*with a keen look*) was that no woman had had the sense to marry those eyes in England. Oh ! it's such a beautiful thing to be *happily* married, don't you think ? I guess I never *lived* till I was married.

Alice.

Have you been married long ?

Edna.

Oh yes. Nearly a year. And there's only one little cloud on my happiness. And I'm not sure if it is a cloud . . . I always think that every other woman must be feeling very sad and lonesome because she isn't the wife of *my* husband.

Alice.

Yes. I suppose that every woman who is really in love with her husband has that feeling sometimes.

Edna.

I have it always. Sometimes it's quite painful. Willie's very glad to be in his Five Towns again. He's just as proud of them as if he'd built them.

Alice.

I hadn't the slightest idea you were coming. If I'd known, of course I should have sent you a proper invitation.

Edna.

Invitation! But——

Alice.

I mean, for my reception.

Edna.

Reception?

Alice.

We are holding a reception this afternoon. My husband is mayor, you know.

Edna.

This afternoon! For the land's sake! (*Springing up*) Well, I must say I thought everybody was—er—dressed up considerable. But then Willie had told me it wasn't dollars *you* were short of, and I—— Well. I'm just *off* now.

Alice.

But please stay.

Edna.

Oh, I'll come back! But I must put a frock on. (*Calling*) Willie!

Alice.

I'm sure your dress is beautiful!

Edna.

You shall just see me in my best. I couldn't think of being in this old thing at one of your receptions. Willie, darling!

(*Enter Willie and Mrs Copestick.*)

Willie.

What's amiss, darling ? Where have yon run off to ?

Edna.

Why didn't you tell me it was the mayoress's reception this afternoon ?

Willie.

Reception ! I didn't know.

Edna.

Come along, you ignorant darling. I've got to get into a frock. Come, now. We'll be right back in an hour or an hour and a half, Mrs Emery. Now, Willie, not a moment.

Willie (*aside to Mrs Copestick*).

Her and her clothes ! She's that particular you wouldn't believe !

Alice (*who has rung the bell*).

You *will* come back ?

Edna.

Shall I come back !

Willie.

Trust her ! Reception, eh ! That's a new thing in Bursley. Well, for the present, then . . .

(*Everyone smiles and nods. Bessie appears, and Edna, followed by Willie, hurries out, L. Mrs Copestick and Alice look at each other in*

silence, Mrs Copestick making a gimace of ironic amusement.)

Mrs Copestick.

After that, suppose we have some tea?

Alice.

There's only one cup, you know. The tea will be horribly stewed.

Mrs Copestick (*pouring out tea*).

Never mind. Tea is always tea. Here, you begin. You seem to need it.

Alice.

Do I? (*Drinking*) It isn't so bad, after all.

Mrs Copestick.

Got stouter, hasn't he?

Alice.

Yes. (*Diffidently*) Don't you think he's changed, himself?

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, and he's had to change his waistcoats too! I daresay he's been perfectly idle for some time. You mustn't expect him to keep as slim as Ralph. When a man is mayor, and superintendent of Sunday School, and Circuit Steward, and manages to look after a manufactory with four hundred hands in his spare time, he's not likely to put on fat. But poor Willie is fixed differently.

Alice.

Why do you say poor Willie?

Mrs Copestick.

Well, why do I ?

Alice.

Do you think he will ever start his agency ?

Mrs Copestick.

Not he ! He'll simply go on getting fatter and fatter.

Alice.

He's certainly different—himself.

Mrs Copestick.

I don't think he's different. Come to think of it, he's just the same Willie.

Alice.

Oh ! I think he's *quite* different. Not conceited, but——

Mrs Copestick.

Oh, no. Not conceited. Merely a little silly. But that's nothing. His wife's flattery has been too much for him. And what else could you expect ? It would be too much for a far stronger man than Willie Beach. Fancy always being admired ! Fancy always being slobbered over and kissed by that hysterical creature !

Alice.

Auntie !

Mrs Copestick.

I say, slobbered over and kissed by that hysterical creature.

Alice.

Do you think she kisses him a great deal ?

Mrs Copestick.

I should imagine it was more than probable. Evidently a very kind-hearted, nice girl—at least, I hope so—but—well ! After you with that cup, my dear. (*Pours out tea for herself.*)

Alice.

He used to be so—wistful . . . something . . . I don't know.

Mrs Copestick.

Well, with a wife like that, and quantities of money, you can't blame him if he doesn't look wistful any more. Did you take stock of her pearls ?

Alice (*reflective*).

When he was "put upon," when everybody was against him——

Mrs Copestick (*interrupting*).

Everybody except you.

Alice.

Except me ! Why, it was my works that caused all the trouble.

Mrs Copestick.

My dear Alice, I may as well tell you at once —I know all about that affair. *All.*

Alice (*startled*).

What do you know? Who told you?

Mrs Copestick.

Willie did himself, before he left the town. He *had* to confide in someone, and so he confided in me. Here, have some more tea. (*Offers it.*)

Alice.

Did he say——

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, all that. All about you being an angel, and saving him, and how he had always worshipped you afar off.

Alice.

He said that to you?

Mrs Copestick.

He did. And what's more—he's just whispered to me out there (*pointing L.*) while his wife was here with you, not to "let on" to her.

Alice.

He did the same to me (*sighing*).

Mrs Copestick.

Then he's gone and ruined himself with both of us!

Alice.

And yet you say he hasn't changed!

Mrs Copestick.

And he hasn't. It's the same character in different circumstances, that's all.

Alice.

Did he really hint to you that he used to be——

Mrs Copestick (*interrupting*).

In love with you? No, he didn't hint. He told me outright. Said he had always been.

Alice.

But surely he didn't imply that I—cared for him!

Mrs Copestick (*shaking her head*).

He wouldn't descend to *that*!

Alice.

Because something his wife said——

Mrs Copestick.

The creature! *Her*, I mean! (*With a casual air*) But you *were* in love with him.

Alice.

Auntie!

Mrs Copestick.

Now, my dear, I'm a plain woman, and so are you. So let's admit candidly, as we're talking about it, that you did work yourself up into a state about Willie Beach. For one thing, you saved him. That was enough in itself. But there was more than that. If you hadn't been engaged——

Alice.

But I *was* engaged.

Mrs Copestick.

And a very good thing, too! You had a feeling for Willie. I noticed it always. I notice it now, in your voice.

Alice.

Auntie, you do come out with the most dreadful things.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, I do, don't I? I shouldn't have been surprised if you had tried to break off your engagement.

Alice.

Well, what next!

Mrs Copestick.

Will you look me in the face, Mrs Ralph Emery, and tell me that the idea never entered your head?

Alice.

Oh, ideas! When *you* were engaged, did the idea of breaking it off never enter your head?

Mrs Copestick (*laughing*).

Fifty times. And yet I got on splendidly with my husband.

Alice.

And don't I with mine? Of course, I was upset. I remember being very hurt with Ralph because he said that Willie Beach was no good.

That made me feel all the more . . . pity. I've often thought of Willie working hard and getting on in Canada——

Mrs Copestick.

Especially when you were feeling low.

Alice.

Well, one can't always be gay.

Mrs Copestick.

No. The daily round, the daily husband. . . . My dear, let it be a lesson to you. While you've been thinking of the wistful Willie struggling away on some lonely farm, and worshipping you afar off —*that* was what pleased you, you know (*Alice smiles and shakes her head*)—while you were thinking of him like that, well—he was just fattening in the arms of his Edna. It's a mercy you can't possibly pity him any longer.

Alice.

Why?

Mrs Copestick.

Because—well, because you're not of a forgetful disposition.

Alice.

I don't want to pity him.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, you do.

Alice (*stoutly*).

I'm sure I don't.

Mrs Copestick.

Well, anyway, you're sorry he's no longer to be pitied. And, mind you, so am I. There are some people who are only at their best when they are to be pitied. Bad luck brings out all their nice points, the lambs! When Willie had nothing to recommend him but his helplessness——

Alice.

You can't say he wasn't fond of his father.

Mrs Copestick.

Yes, he hadn't even sense enough to see through his father. He was just about the one person in Bursley who hadn't. What I say is, that when Willie had nothing to recommend him but his helplessness, and his eyes, and a fine chance of penal servitude, we all thought the world of him. I did myself. He was delightful. Just like a sort of a sad song after supper. He's done nothing positively wicked in letting the girl worship him and feed him up: he's only been using the same qualities that he always used. But he's no longer miserable, and so he's objectionable. There are a lot of people like that.

Alice.

I suppose there are.

Mrs Copestick.

Now, Ralph is emphatically *not* one of them.

Alice.

Ralph is magnificent.

Mrs Copestick.

I know he is. But never once, my dear, I venture to say, have you thought of Ralph with the same—er—tender feeling as you've thought of Willie Beach. You couldn't have done. You admit yourself that you resented Ralph's attitude. Yes, and let me tell you that half Bursley has a grudge against Ralph—because he's as straight as a die, and always knows what he wants and is always clever enough to get it. Is there another man in this town that could have got *you*? He succeeds in everything: he's religious without making a fuss over it; he's very charitable; he never loses his temper; he never swears; and he's rolling in money—yours and his. People don't like it—naturally.

Alice.

I know what you mean. You're quite right.

Mrs Copestick.

Of course I'm right! What's the matter with Ralph, anyhow? Mind you, I put that question to myself sometimes. Well, I say, he's too perfect. Stuff! Rubbish! You might as well say an egg was too fresh.

Alice.

I'm very fond of Ralph, very fond indeed.

Mrs Copestick.

You're the very wife for him. And (*with charming dryness*) if only you could think of him in

Canada, struggling to get on— (*Alice picks up the teapot.*) Don't fidget with the teapot, dear. It's empty.

Alice.

Well——

Mrs Copestick.

You were both very lucky.

Alice.

In meeting one another ?

Mrs Copestick.

In being born with commonsense. Goodness knows where you'd have been without it, six years ago.

(*Enter Ralph, perfectly attired.*)

Ralph.

I'm just in time. I've seen Alderman Lawton's carriage coming up the road. Are you ready ? (*The women nod.*) Come along, then. (*He leads the way to the drawing-room.*)

(*Curtain.*)

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